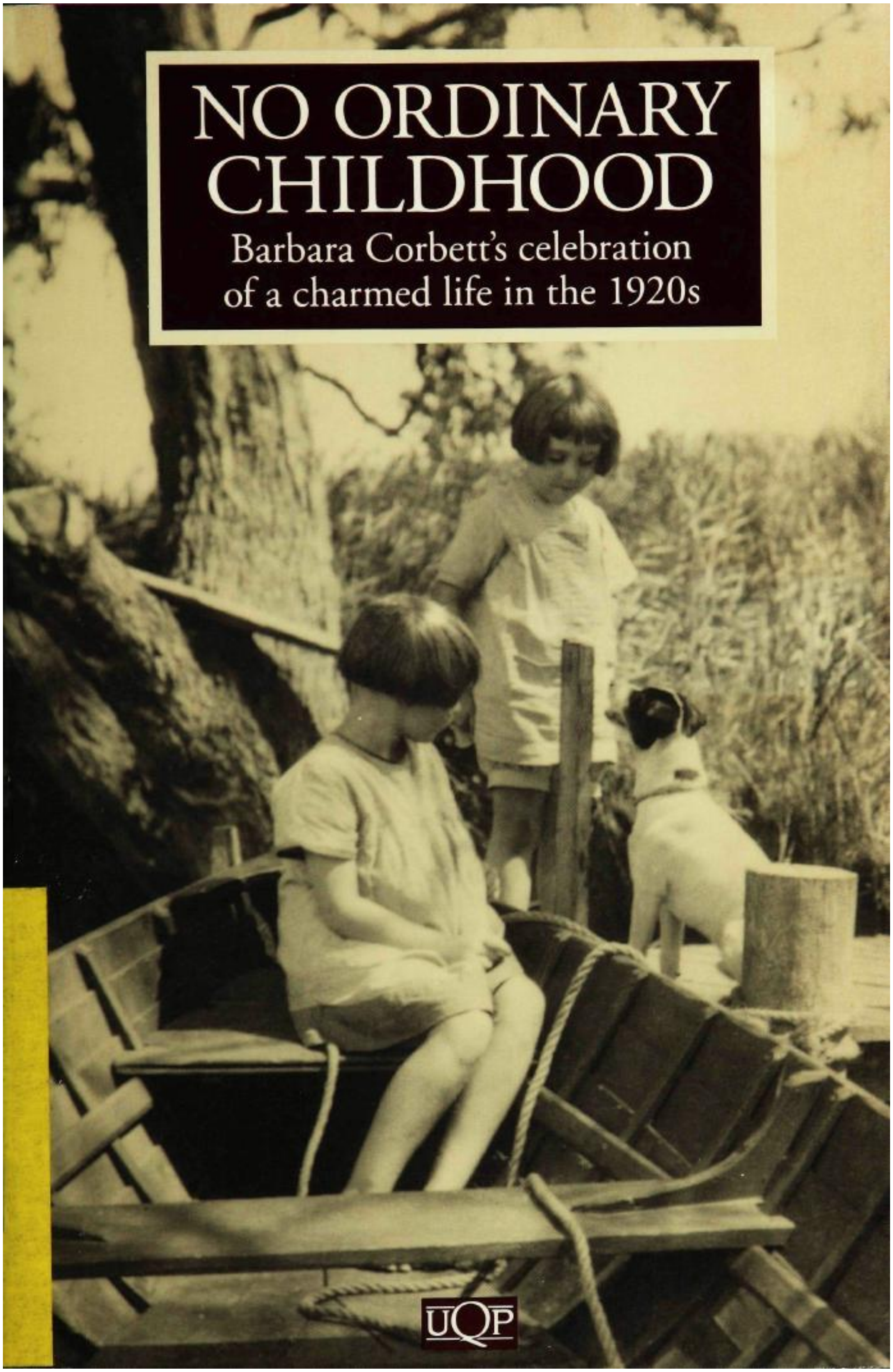
NO ORDINARY CHILDHOOD

Barbara Corbett's celebration of a charmed life in the 1920s



UQP

NO ORDINARY CHILDHOOD

Barbara Corbett began writing at the age of eight, during the idyllic childhood she describes in her memoir. Later she became a copywriter and layout artist in Sydney and London. She returned to Australia in 1951 and for twenty years was creative director of Neville Corbett Advertising. After her involvement with a number of art galleries in Sydney and Brisbane, she bought 230 acres near Maleny where she and her present husband now breed cattle on the flats and work to preserve the rich flora and fauna of the rainforest gullies. Recently she has been active in the anti-dam campaign for the Mary River valley. Barbara Corbett has written a number of stories for children and a new children's title, *The Day Before Yesterday*, will be published by UQP in 1994.

The photographs of Dora Creek included in this book are by Barbara Corbett's father Malcolm McDonald (1880–1956).

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Barbara Corbett's celebration of a charmed life in the 1920s

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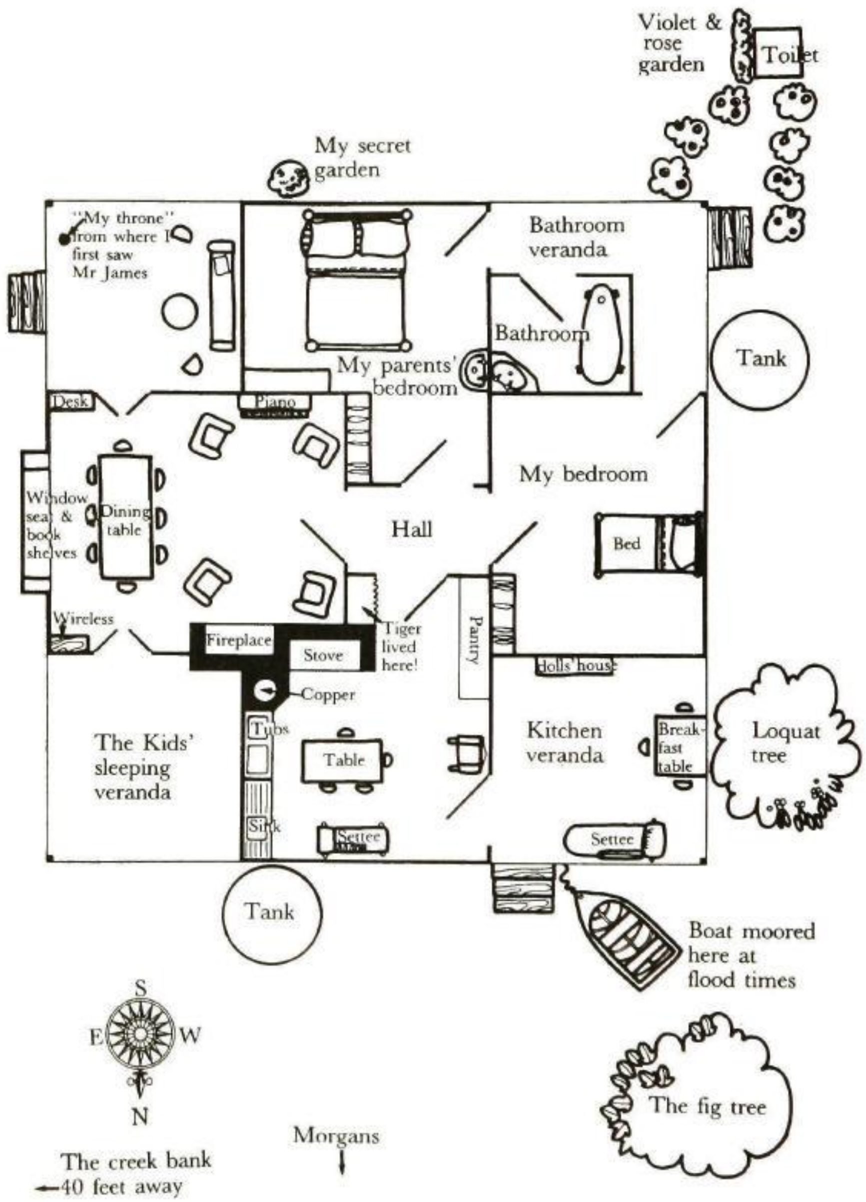
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Violet & rose garden
Toilet
My secret garden
"My throne" from where I first saw Mr James
Bathroom veranda
Bathroom
Tank
My parents' bedroom
Desk
Piano
My bedroom
Window seat & book shelves
Dining table
Hall
Bed
Wireless
Fireplace
Stove
Tiger lived here!
Pantry
Dolls' house
Copper
Tubs
The Kids' sleeping veranda
Table
Kitchen veranda
Breakfast table
Loquat tree
Sink
Settee
Settee
Tank
Boat moored here at flood times
S
E
W
N
The fig tree
Morgans
The creek bank
40 feet away

The Scene

Back of Lake Macquarie runs Dora Creek . . . under a railway bridge . . . then in neat right-angled reaches to Avondale and the hills beyond. A still forgotten backwater, compared to nearby Wyong, Newcastle or even Dobell's Wangi-Wangi. During the late 1920s it was lush and lonely, sparsely peopled with characters who'd drifted in from other places, other eras.

Nostalgia was in the air. There was a link with sad things, newly past. Memories of the war echoed in the songs we sang round the piano. Pale photos of lost brothers-in-uniform stood on sitting-room dressers, lawned with ribbons and medals. Families had survived one great upheaval, and were heading on the downward slope towards the Depression.

Country people here were aware of new-fangled gadgets like automobiles and aeroplanes and wireless, but the changes had not yet churned their lives. In the little settlement of Dora Creek, the old-timers flashed into my young mind the varying facets of their deeply imprinted pasts. Imagine: two old ladies in Victorian bustled-dresses, still . . . the watch-maker who talked of Zulu Wars . . . a Boxer Rebellion hero, who wore a scarlet cummerbund with his summer-whites and resided in ebony splendor looted from the Empress' Summer Palace in Peking. A bearded sailor from clipper-ship days played chess with a bandy-legged Irish pioneer who sat a horse better than he walked.

At ground level there were laced leather leggings, wartime puttees and trousers tied below the knee with rope. Fishermen rolled theirs to the calf. Their children played in the dusty roads of Dora Creek, with bare bottoms peeping beneath ragged skirts. Most men slouched by, their bare feet kicking the dust. The occasional one strode by in elastic-sided boots. Or Blücher boots, dust thick, beneath baggy pants.

They were the timber-getters. Tall, rangy men, faces

shadowed by wide felt hats. Every afternoon at four, they'd congregate at Tafe's butcher shop to watch and tease and chaff the womenfolk. Old Tafe, in blood-stained apron and boater-hat, would leave his meat cleaver axe standing on the tree-trunk chopping block and join the young bloods. My mother found the scene threatening, but the local women gave as good as they got.

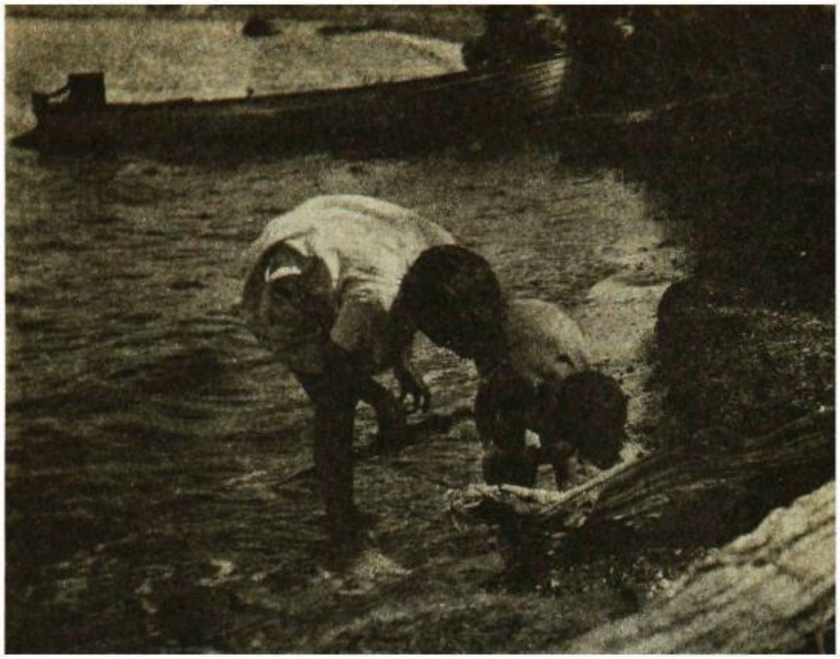
The bullock teams stood wearily, heads down under the weight of the big wooden yokes. When the move began, the drivers' waistcoats flapped as they cracked the whips and shouted. Gradually the ponderous train would move off, dragging huge cedar logs through the township, in a flurry of dust. The complaints of the beasts, the grinding squeak of the iron-clad wheels, the vicious crack of leather whips, the incessant shouting of the bullockies ... that was a sound to hear, a sight to see.

Down on the creek, a line of fishing boats chug-chugged under the bridge, homeward bound from the Lake. Leading was a sturdy boat with shark's jaws, in a gaping circle, mounted on the bow. It was the day's big trophy. Once at the wharf the fishermen raced to carry their boxes of smelly fish up to the train. They were usually late, but the driver always waited. His engine poised on the bridge, he'd hoot and whistle with great aggression. And the trainy smell of coal smoke and gritty cinders drifted over the urchins swimming on the bank below.

The train had wooden boxcar carriages and, through the grimy windows, you could see city people: women with bobbed hair, frizzed or hiding under deep cloche hats ... men, hair slicked with vaseline and parted in the middle ... little girls with basin-cuts and smock-frocks had cinders wiped from red eyes. People in trains always ate bananas out of brown paper bags. To me that was the glorious status-symbol of train travel.

Behind the colourful pageant, it was a time of religious bigotry between Catholics and Protestants. Bigotry bred from Australia's earliest settlers. The Catholic 'have-nots' from Ireland and the Presbyterian 'haves' ... tough, thrifty Scots who'd saved enough to buy their own land when they arrived. This bigotry flourished underground in Dora Creek, and bled over into political attitudes.

The Rail Strike of 1929 created a deeper rift. Farmers,





struggling to repay mortgages, were forced to get their fruit to market. The banks were foreclosing. So they helped drive the trains. Everyone was trying to survive, so it was a time for seeing with one-eyed, black-or-white directness.

People in Sydney were on the bread line, yet fruit was being dumped in the sea outside the Heads. To keep prices up! Sometimes it was our fruit that was dumped, and no cheque came from the Markets. Only a bill for the freight.

City relatives sent children to the country, where there was food aplenty. And for nothing! All the milk you could drink, all the eggs you could eat. Fruit to be picked off the tree and blackberries galore. Tea, sugar, flour—and the occasional roast—was all we bought. Payment was usually in kind: butter, eggs, fruit or perhaps a pig.

We lived about two miles up-river from the fishing village of Dora Creek. In 1918 father had cleared the land by hand, alone, with only the help of a horse. Then he planted two big orchards of oranges, peaches, apples and pears. When times were hard, he grew small-crops in the wide avenues between the trees. Mostly peas and beans . . . sometimes potatoes.

At picking time each season, a family who lived somewhere back in the bush would bring their long, diminishing trail of eight children. They fluttered like a bright kite-tail down the rows of green. It was back-breaking work for all but the youngest ones. In 1929 I believe the family rate was five shillings a day plus tea. Land was selling for 2s. 6d. an acre between Morriset and Wyee. Men were getting nine shillings a week to work on the roads. It was sure money and some of the farmers took it, while their wives worked the land.

From the veranda of our house, as I did my Correspondence School lessons, I could see right down the orchard. The dark swirl of dust in the distance was my father ploughing. Slowly, steadily at a snail's pace, he would get closer . . . the dust rising above the trees . . . and out of the cloud would appear the great Clydesdale, straining against his collar, harness jangling. Then my father's voice: 'Come around! Come around, Dick! Git over!'

The horse would carefully move his huge feathered hooves to manoeuvre a complete about-face. 'Whooaa there!' and Dick would pause, as my father lift-dragged the heavy plough around. Then the shout: 'Giddup! Giddup! Off we go!' He'd

loudly click his tongue. Then they'd get moving, jerkily at first, to dig another furrow, deep and black, straight as an arrow. My father sweating, and stumbling lopsidedly in the awkward valley of soft earth.

Beyond the orchard, on the river in the early morning, there was often a fishing boat pulling in the black nets, alive with fish. They were the Seatons and 'not wholly to be trusted'. My mother always brought me inside when they chose to fish on our reach of the river.

I didn't quite understand what she meant by 'not to be trusted', but I could *see* they were *different* from us. They rowed standing up, lazily pushing the oars! Whereas we sat down and pulled the oars. It was most strange and I sniffed her concern.

All these outside things impinged, but were at a strange tangent to my private world of childhood.



The House Next Door

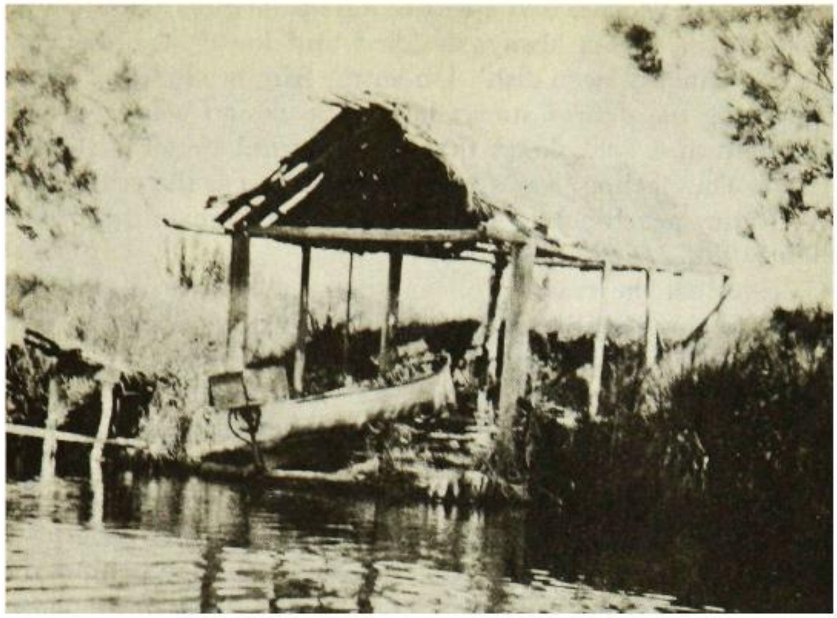
It was early summer 1927. I was somewhere between four and five, chattily secure at home and as far afield as the house next door. Our sunny breakfast on the veranda had suddenly sombred to the wireless broadcast: 'The ferry *Greycliffe* sank yesterday in Sydney Harbour, killing thirty-seven people. It sank in three minutes after being rammed by a big passenger liner, *Tahiti*.'

My Aunty Max lived at Vaucluse and commuted by ferry every day to the city. Was she one of the thirty-seven dead? The gloom and anxiety lay heavy in the house. News was slow. They would have to wait till the afternoon to check if a telegram had arrived at Dora Creek Post Office.

I yearned to escape the house, to move out into my own private sunlit world.

Walking along the shady bank, I went through an orange orchard, fringed to the water with rustling bladey grass. Tall and whispering, telling of bandicoots and snakes beneath, the breeze above. The grass was as tall as I, hiding mysteries that were slightly threatening. So I always walked in the safety of the orchard, barefoot and kicking the warm black soil, ridged from plowing. Part way down the orchard, a narrow track went off to the old boatshed. It was tired and leaning, made from rough saplings and roofed with bark. The upright timbers were smeared with colours. Beautiful delicate colours and a delight to my childish eyes. They had been put there by a famous artist, my mother told me. He painted some of his pictures from the boatshed, lunched there and, at the end of the day, wiped clean his brushes and palette on the rough timbers. Who was he? J. J. Hilder, who immortalised my Dora Creek in the 1920s. As an adult I learnt of his fame as a water-colourist, yet there on the grey timbers were his 'oils'.

After dabbling my feet in the sun-drenched water, I'd leave



The old boatshed was tired and leaning—roofed with bark.

the cool air of the boatshed and climb the bank back to the orchard. Perhaps there'd be a fat bright orange within reach. They were young Navel trees and the skins were thick and pithy. A delight to thrust your thumbnail into. The Valencias were thin-skinned and Presbyterian. They had none of the delicious voluptuousness of peeling a Navel orange. Mr Burbank, what childhood joys I owe to you. With a trail of peel and clutching the segments in a hot little hand, I'd climb the wooden stile into the Morgans' house paddock. Past the Chinese pagoda that framed a view of the river. It had been built years ago by my Uncle Ern, when he returned from service in the Boxer Rebellion. China had tugged at his heart, and he'd tried to recreate the romance of youth on the banks of his middle-age.

I'd climb the steps to the porch that was shaded in a tumble of wisteria. The Morgans lived in the house now. Love and Arne. He always called her 'Love', sometimes shouting it from one end of the orchard to the house. So I never knew her real name. She was 'Mrs Morgan'. He was Uncle Arne, and I was 'Love' when I visited them.

In Mrs Morgan's pantry were jars and jars, shelf upon shelf,

of preserved peaches and apricots and nectarines. They had no children, so I was always coddled and loved and fed with preserves in a 'special dish'. Under the fruit it had white swans swimming on a lurid sunset lake. The design was iced with porcelain and gold flakes that felt beautiful under my small finger. The 'feeling' was always as rapturous as the tasting . . . sweet juicy peach halves topped with clotted cream that tasted slightly 'off'. It was delicious.

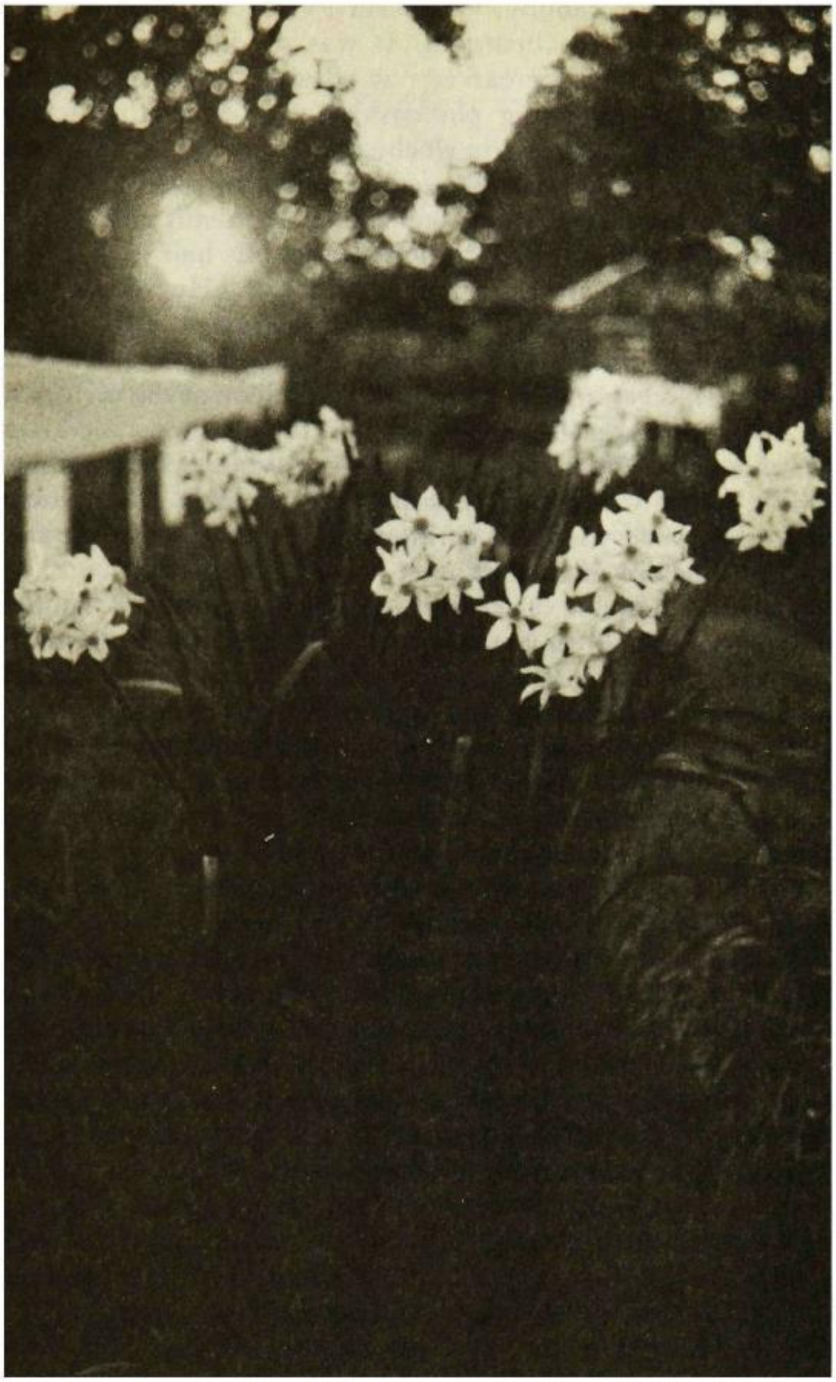
'Never eat the cream', my mother used to warn. 'They're none too careful.' She was probably right, because I used to watch enchanted as the flies left footprints in the thick cream on the lip of the jug. How could anything so small leave footprints? Exciting things like that were never allowed to happen in my mother's kitchen.

The Morgans' butter tasted sour too. Different from my father's immaculate pats, but just like the country butter I tasted in France years later. They had a larder behind the kitchen, where the milk was left to set in big open enamel dishes for days. If I called on the right day, Mrs Morgan would let me ladle off the clotted cream with a big spoon. It had holes in it, and you had to wait carefully till the whey had strained through. Then the cream would be slopped into an old wooden churn. When it was three-quarters full, the wooden top with its plunger would be tapped into place. Then the long arm-tiring job of butter-making would commence.

'Big Love' and 'Little Love' would take turns. But at the age of six I suspect I tired out at minute intervals. While I was working the plunger up and down, up and down, Mrs Morgan would search for the small glass vial of Hansen's junket tablets. She'd warm some of the skim milk and make a junket for tea. Then she would measure out two jugs of milk and pour it into a big black enamel saucepan. It would be boiled till the froth started to rise, and quickly poured into the jugs for Arne to drink. The last of the skim milk went into a slop bucket for the pigs and Rover, the dog.

Rover was a big tan Airedale with enormous bare patches of black skin on his back. He was our dog's bitter enemy and very aggressive to me if I met him in our orchard. But here at the home of 'Love', he was a gentle friend.

'Love' and Arne slept in a fairytale bedroom. It was almost entirely filled with a big brass bedstead with pink rose-bud



Jonquils still bloom in big clumps where Mrs Morgan planted her garden.

knobs and a lace canopy. Whenever I visited I always asked if I could go into the bedroom. It was so different from my mother's bed of classic carved oak. Beside 'Love' and Arne's bed was a big wedding photograph. 'Love' looking totally improbable in a white satin cloche hat and a veil that enclosed her slim wedding gown and swept in a lily trail around her feet . . . and even across Arne's feet. Arne stood stiff and upright behind her in a dark high-buttoned suit. His hair looked neat and bleak over an egg-smooth forehead. He didn't look anything like the smiling, jovial Arne I knew.

So *that* was what a wedding was. I'd never seen one in real life. It seemed strange and alien. I would look at the picture in its silver frame, each time I went into the bedroom. I'd study every detail of the doll-like figures. It represented something I didn't quite understand. I suppose I couldn't comprehend anything as everyday and permanent as a married couple ever having a before or a beginning.

On the other side of the bed was a table sporting a double-barrel shotgun. Over the romantic pink and lace bed was an 'electric device' fixed high on the wall. It was one of Arne's inventions. It was connected by trip wires to the orchard. If a wire was tripped in the night, a bell would ring on one of the eight signals over the bed. Arne would then rush and fire the double-barrel shotgun down the appropriate row of trees, and the next row towards the creek for good measure.

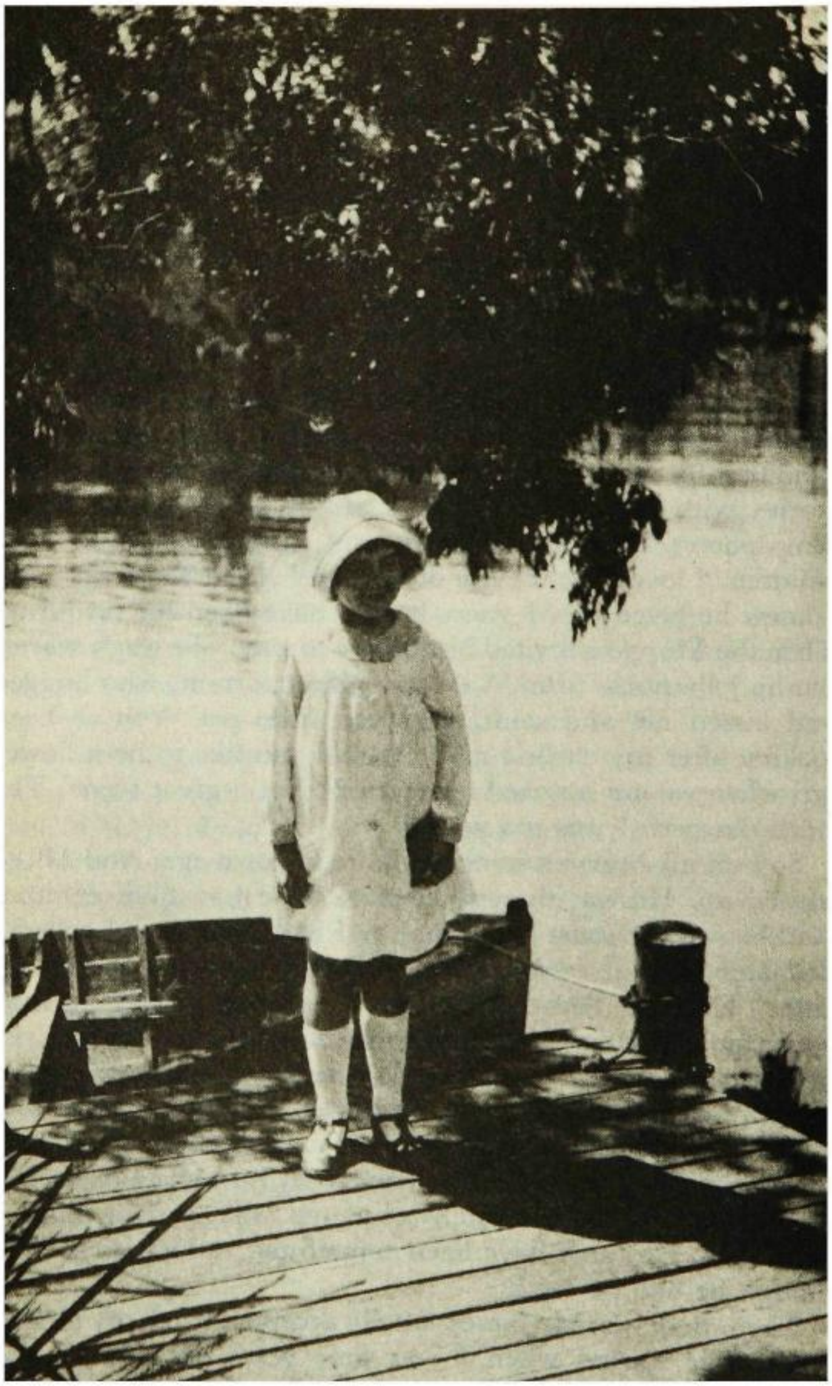
Now Arne and 'Love' were very religious. They were Seventh Day Adventists and in fact took me to Sabbath School every Saturday. They were very big on Jesus and the Lord and how Love Thy Neighbour was the secret of life. The Loving Way of Life was their creed and they were sweet loving gentle people. Except when the local Dora Creek fishermen stole their fruit. After two Charlie Seatons got shot in the leg one night—there were eight or nine Charlies in the Seaton population of thirty—they had no more problems in the orchard.

Love Before Seven

I had three great love affairs by the time I was seven. Mr Uttley was my Saturday date. He came into my life at six, when I started going to Sabbath School with the Morgans. He was Scottish and handsome and wore a kilt. He supervised the sand tray teaching, where the younger children acted out Bible stories with little lead figurines set in an authentic desert atmosphere. I loved the sand tray interaction with other children. I loved the theatre of it. And I loved Mr Uttley and I knew he loved me. I guess I must have been his favourite. Then the Morgans invited his fiancée to stay. She was a warm, plump jolly nurse from Wahroonga Sanatorium, who hugged and kissed me and said: 'Oh, you little pet! You've been looking after my darling man! Would you like to be a flower girl when we are married next year?' Not a great scene. The truth dawned. I was too young!

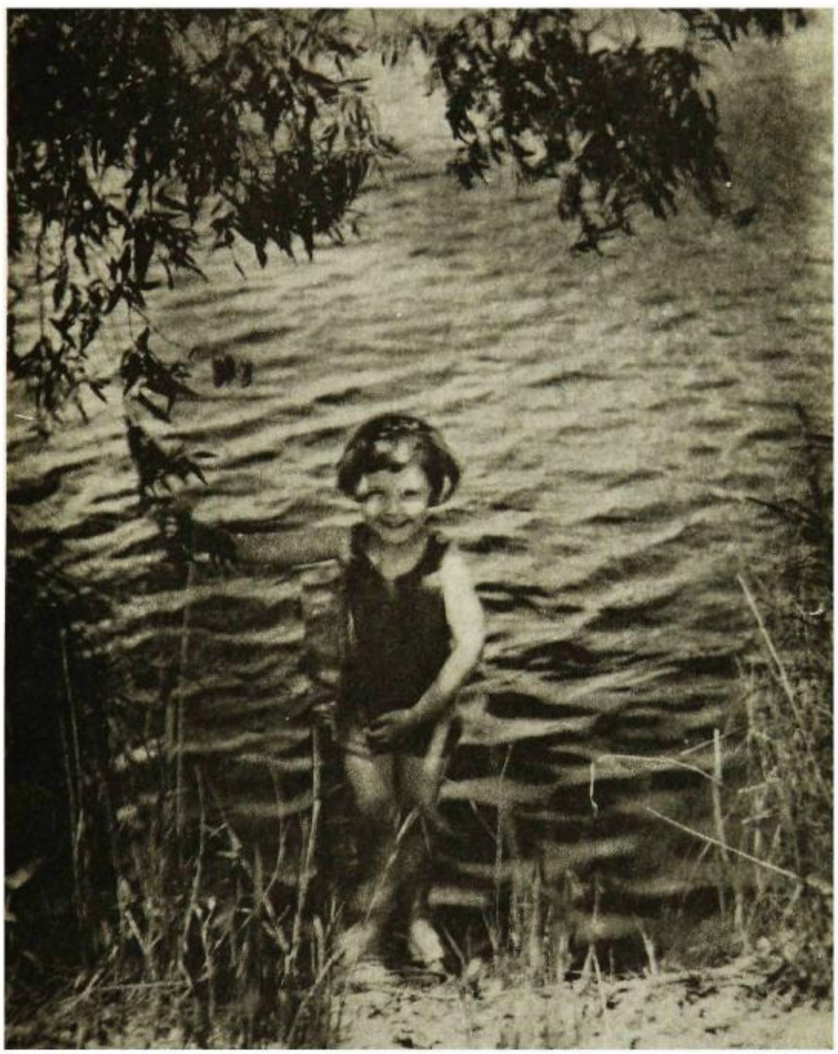
So I set my heart on someone more my own age. And Alfred turned up. He was the city cousin of the Lauchlin children. And he was the most beautiful boy I had ever seen. I called a doll after him. I sewed him a handkerchief. I wrote him a letter. Then my Aunt spoilt it all by singing a 1929 hit tune with changed lyrics: 'Why do some boys look so sweet, Even though they've got no teeth?' It made me feel very embarrassed. I could have curled up inside and disappeared. To love . . . made one vulnerable. Why was it all right for grown-ups and not for children? He went back to Sydney and I never saw him again. But I have often wondered what sort of man he grew into. He must have been something, to look good even though he had no teeth.

Then there was Mr James, totally accepted by all my family! Our affair started when I was four years old and he was seventy-two. It lasted six years. I moved to the city then, and he died a year later. But how did it start?



Ready and waiting on the wharf, to meet my Saturday date—Mr Uttley.

An unknown old man used to push-row his catamaran down the river. He came past our house once a week. He would glide past on his way to Dora Creek township, early in the morning. I would be sitting on the pot on the afternoon tea veranda, which had a pleasant view of the river. I'd wave from my small white enamel throne. He'd pause in his rhythmic rowing, lean on the oars and wave back. For the rest of the day, I'd hover round the landing wharf. I wanted another glimpse of this grey-bearded stranger in his cloth cap.



I'd hover round the landing wharf. . .

After a few weeks, I took matters into my own hands and decided to entice him ashore. The minute he had passed from view, rowing slowly northwards . . . and I had escaped from my morning 'marooning' on the pot . . . I picked him some flowers.

Not my mother's roses or violets or jonquils, but *my* wild paddock flowers. A nice bunch of yellow dandelions and white clover with a goodly sprinkling of blow-fly and shivvery grass. It looked very gay and enticing. As the day wore on, the bright dandelions hung their heads and the clover wilted. However, once tied with a ribbon, I didn't change it. It lay on the wharf waiting, patiently like me. I watched the grey spotted toady fish, sunbaking with slow fins in the shallows . . . darting off when I dropped an acorn on them. I lay on the landing and reached my hand down between the logs to tickle the eels. Finally, after sleepy hours of waiting, I heard the slap of his oars. The flowers! The flowers! I waved them enticingly and called.

Mr James leant on one oar and swerved the catamaran towards the wharf.

'They're for you', I said.

We looked each other in the eyes. His were brown and bright and smiling. He was surrounded by a strange smell. Dark brown, tangy with a feel of faraway places. He took the wilted flowers and rowed off.

I ran up to tell my mother. 'That was nice dear. Give him some roses next time.'

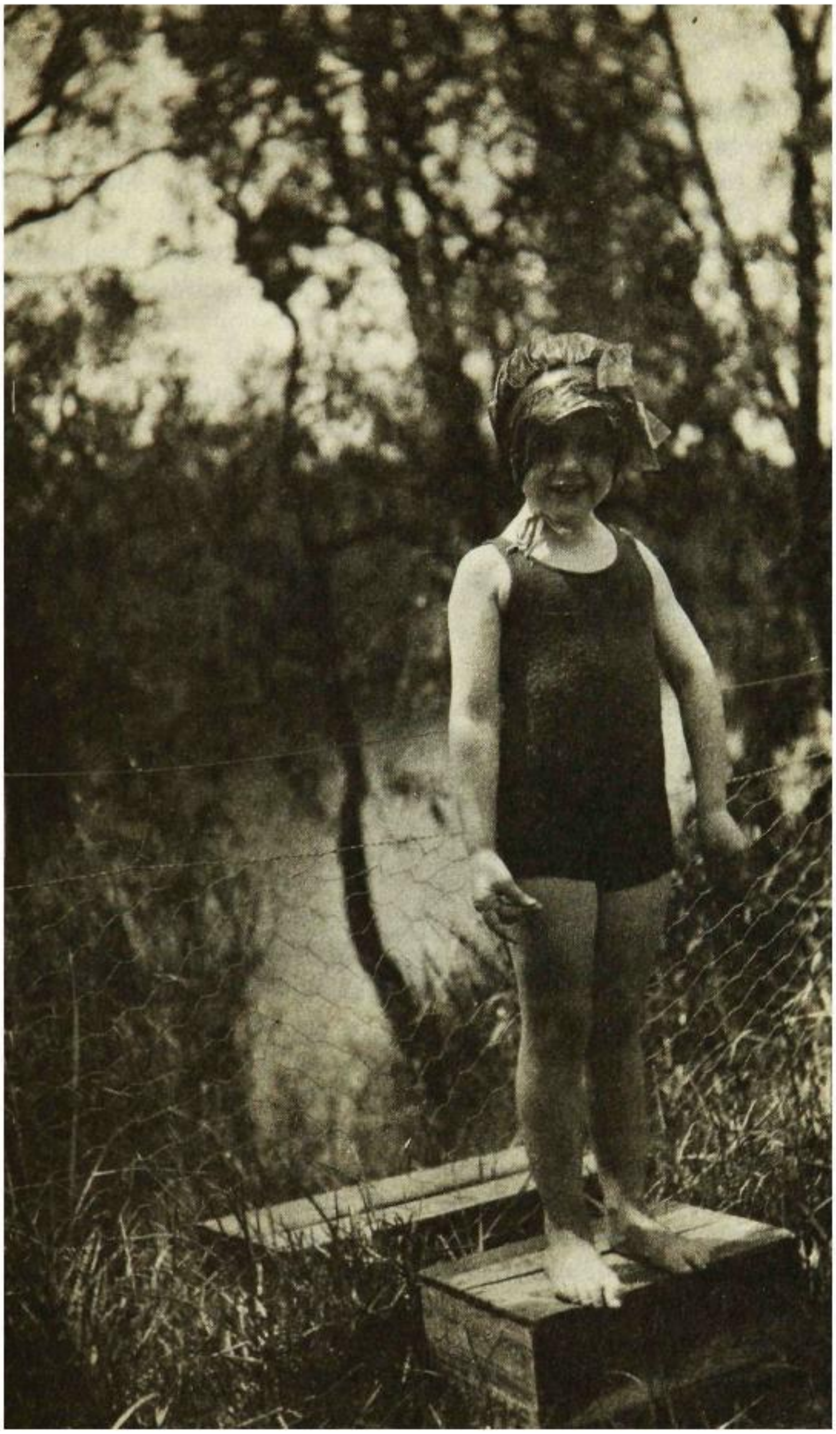
So seven days later, after seeing Mr James glide past from my potty-throne, I asked my mother to pick some roses. We kept them fresh in a vase all day. When I rushed up to notify her of his approach, my mother carefully wrapped the roses in white tissue paper. I then took the lure down to the wharf. Mr James leant on his near oar and drifted in. By the time he touched the wharf, my mother was beside me.

'Good afternoon ma-am, you're no doubt the Little Missie's mother?'

'You're absolutely right', said my mother. 'Would you like to call in for a cup of tea next week?' (Nothing was rushed in those days.)

'Thank you ma-am, I would.'

'She's been wanting to talk to you.'



'I'll call in on my way back from the station. I've a canoe to deliver next week.' (Indicating a man of trade and substance.)

So it began!

I dreamed of the bearded stranger with the strange smell every night. He looked like Santa Claus. But he felt just my age. I asked my father about the smell.

'Ah, that would be tar. Mr James is an old sailor, you know. His catamaran is tarred to make it waterproof. Have you noticed what color it is?'

'It's black! Black all over', I said.

'That's the color of tar', explained my father. 'In the old days the sailing ships often used to coat their hulls in tar to keep out the water and the worm. I've heard Mr James used to sail on the square riggers. He's an interesting old man!'



Mr James used to sail on the square riggers—he and his catamaran smelt of tar.

'He's coming to tea next week, isn't he mother?'

'Then I'd certainly like to meet him', said my father. 'That's, of course, if I'm invited!'

Finally the day arrived. Mr James glided past with a shiny red canoe roped across the hulls of his catamaran. I waved and called, 'Hello!' 'Would you like to make him some butterfly cakes?' said my mother. I bounced with excitement. (How wonderful when your family approved of your own dream-love!)

The afternoon tea was filled with grown-up talk about the Commonwealth Shipping Line that had just been sold. It went over my head. But I remember the warm shining glances Mr James kept sharing with me. He was the experienced older man every young girl dreams of. Why has no one ever invented an aftershave that smells of windjammer tar?

Anyway the affair was idyllic. We met on the wharf every week, and I was his 'Little Missie'. I gave him flowers and sometimes cakes. Little ones in paper cups with pink icing and hundreds-and-thousands.

And then the day came when he wanted a serious talk with my father. He wanted to make a canoe for the Little Missie. Would my father allow it? It would mean a few trips to his cabin, if my father would bring me there, for 'fittings'. I guess I experienced, at five years of age, the thrill some women get when a lover buys them a mink coat or diamonds. My parents gave their consent.

It was a long boat trip up the river. Mr James lived in the bush just before the bridge that crosses Dora Creek from Morriset to Avondale. There were wild orchids on the trees where we landed. Romance! The little path wound upwards towards a clearing in the bush. And there was my hero's castle. It was the most romantic house I have ever seen. It was made of rusty kerosene tins. The table inside, he had made himself out of saplings and slabs. On it, in a jam jar, were my wilted flowers. Oh poignant, delicious love!

He served tea made of wild sarsaparilla leaves. The vine grew round the door. He moved the jam jar of wilted flowers off the table.

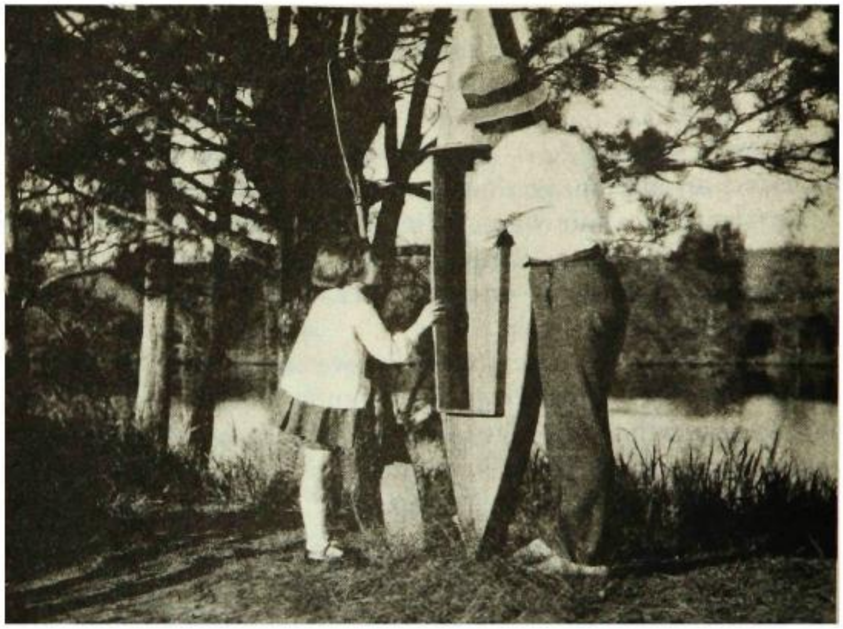
'Put the Little Missie in the middle', he said.

Taking a piece of charcoal out of the fireplace, he traced my outline on the table. 'Sit up straight and keep your legs flat,' he said. Then I was lifted off.

'I'll make her a little craft she can handle by herself. Big enough for her to grow into. And it will have water-tight compartments fore and aft so it will never sink. She'll be perfectly safe, even if she tips it over.' (What a caring, extravagant lover.)

'I'll want her back about this time next week', said Mr James, 'just to check the cockpit size.'

My mother came with us next week. But she did not enjoy



the sarsaparilla tea. Nor did she think the kerosene castle quite as romantic as I did. And the orchid-strewn path was very hard to climb. I was sorry but it didn't dampen my ardour.

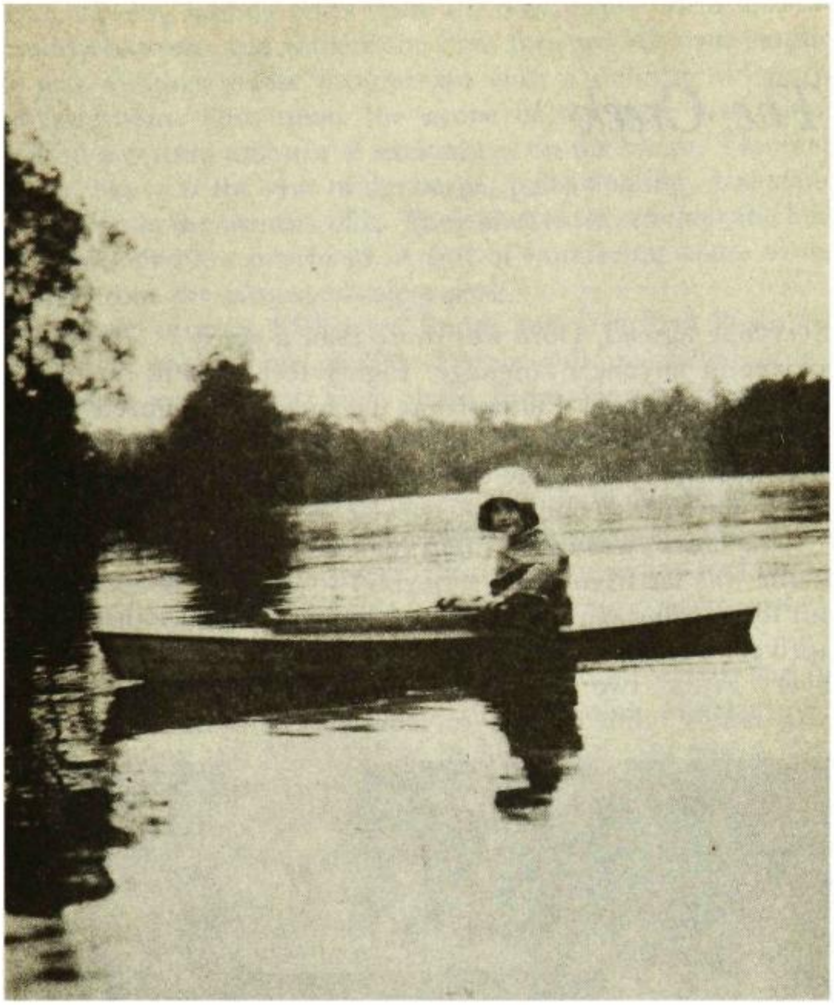
Mr James told us stories of his life on the windjammers. Then of his family life in Vienna. He had been sailing master to the children of the King of Austria. He taught them to sail on the lakes. (Looking back I guess it was the Mayerling prince and his brothers.)

He told a delightful story of the Queen, who had a magnificent ball gown made of yards and yards of Chantilly lace. The first time she wore it, someone spilt red wine down the front. She was very upset. Mr James offered to fix it, take the stain right out. He returned the frock next day . . . perfect!

'It was so easy', he said. 'I just cut the piece out and seamed it again in a deep fold. Just like mending a sail!'

Mature lovers, as I've learned, always have a past. Mr James left a wife and ten children in Vienna. But she didn't speak English, so I could forgive him.

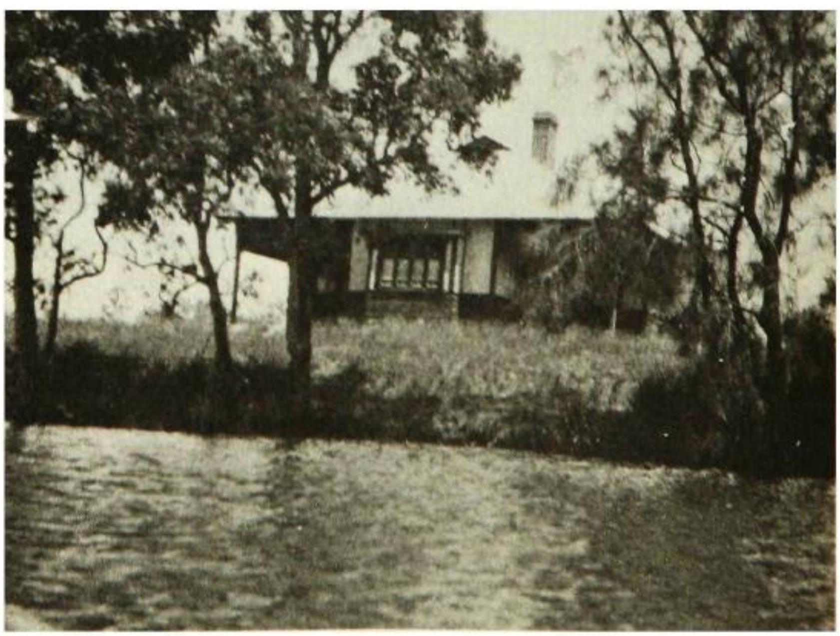
His life had been full and his stories were fascinating. A young girl never needs a boring lover.



The Creek

Everyone agreed, Dora was more than a creek . . . more like a river in anyone's language. Eighty feet wide at our place, spreading to about 150 down at the Lake. We figured 'Dora' must have been some girl way back, who lived up in the hills, near Martinsville, where the creek was just a bubbling stream overhung with tree-ferns.

'The creek' was like a main road going past our door. The traffic was far from heavy, maybe two or three boats a week, but the passing parade was interesting. Avondale, three miles upriver, was where they made Marmite and Granose biscuits. Every Friday two long, beamy wooden barges, loaded high with crates, glided down to Dora Creek Station. The men



The creek was like a main road going past our door.

dragged long sapling poles up to the bow, drove them into the muddy bottom, and walked the boat forward it's own length. It was a slow, sedate progression with a definite old-world enchantment. Sometimes the drone of the little mail plane caused a certain amount of excitement on the barge. The men would pause at the rear of the barge, poles floating, and stand gazing up at the wonder of it. They always waved their felt hats as it swooped low overhead. A sort of wondering salute to the future from the almost obsolete past.

Pioneer aviators Kingsford Smith and Ulm had flown the Pacific in the winter of '28. People still marvelled at the enormous span of their huge plane. From wing-tip to wing-tip it measured sixty feet. 'Our flight is the start of bigger things', Smithy told the people who watched them circle down from the sky that cold dawn at Eagle Farm Drome in Brisbane.

Occasionally there was a nice bit of drama on the creek, and that filled the gossip for weeks. Strangers turned up looking for work during the Depression. Some humping swags, who'd drifted in from out west. A few from overseas, like Mr Squires the English piano-tuner, Terry O'Toole from Ireland, and the German who'd fought us in the 1914–18 War. Hermann got a job helping the Morgans at picking-time. He was a good worker, strong and good tempered, and he was handy with a hammer. But the creek made him nervous. He couldn't swim. We couldn't persuade Hermann to join us for a dip, even in summer. He didn't even want to learn.

Arnold Morgan worked up at Avondale in the Granose factory, and he took the boat every day. It was awkward for 'Love' to be boatless, so they decided to knock up a canoe. There was a sheet of galvanised iron lying around. Bent lengthways, riveted and soldered at each end, it had the right shape. Hermann nailed a few lengths of wood round the edge, to 'firm her up'. They dusted off a square of ply-wood and nailed it to a hard-wood stake, whittled 'er down a bit, and there was 'The Paddle'. Not pretty, but functional.

Arnold fixed a bolt across the inside bow, hitched on a rope, and she could be moored at the wharf like a real boat. She was what you'd call a 'tippy craft'. The moments of greatest danger were getting-in, getting-out and swopping paddle-swipes. But there were no leaks, so all in all, it was a good day's work.

Well, about a week after she'd been launched, Hermann had

to go over to Mr Russell to borrow something . . . a screwdriver or saw-sharpener or something. He was terrified of drowning, but he had faith in the canoe. He'd built her.

So before he clambered in, while he was still on the wharf, he unhitched the rope and carefully tied the end of it round his ankle. Whatever happened, he wouldn't be further than eight feet from the canoe. Well, the creek was about twenty feet deep in the middle, and right about there was where he capsized. Hermann was six feet tall, the rope was eight feet long and the canoe was six feet from stem to stern. That gave Hermann just enough to keep his nose and shouting mouth above water . . . until the canoe decided to settle. And gal iron settles fast.

The panic-stricken shouts were good and loud. The splashing was enough to cause a commotion on its own. My father left his ploughing and ran to his boat. He rowed out midstream and tried to haul Herman aboard. But there was a problem. He couldn't drag more than his arms inboard. And Hermann was shouting in German. My father couldn't figure it out for a while. Then he realised there was no way he could untie the rope on Hermann's foot . . . five feet under water. And Hermann wasn't game to put his head under to untie it himself.

Finally, slowly and with extravagant gestures, Hermann was persuaded to hold tightly on to the back of the boat while my father dived in and cut the rope with a fishing knife. The canoe was lost, and so was Arnold's German helper. Hermann left soon after for Bourke or Broken Hill, where presumably he wouldn't get into deep water.

Before the Morgans moved in round 1924, our cousins lived next door. Alex, the youngest, was known as the 'Little Terror'. If a tank-tap was turned on, he'd certainly done it. If anything was broken or missing, he was usually the culprit. At four, he took some eggs from the nest to make mud pies under the house. Obviously they should be cooked. So he collected chips and wood, and built a good sized fire under the old wooden house. That gives an inkling of the family's attitude to Alex and their day-to-day problems.

Came the bleak morning in mid-winter when Uncle Ern (an upright military officer late of the Boxer Rebellion) decided to start a carpentry project. He reached for the hammer. It was missing!

'Where's that Little Terror?' went out the shout.
Alex lined up, a crowd of one.
'What did you do with the hammer?'
'I didn't touch it, pater.'
'If you don't tell me, I'll give you a whipping!'
'Didn't touch it. Honest!'
His mother came to the rescue. 'Alex, tell your father what you did with the hammer.'



The Little Terror: Alex lined up, a crowd of one.

'I didn't touch it!' The stubbornness showed.

'Come on Alex, tell Mummy. If you're a good boy and tell Mummy, I won't let your father hit you.'

'I didn't touch it!' His bottom lip stuck out with great obstinacy.

'Look my little chicken, if you whisper it to me, I'll make you a big apple pie.'

'I frew it in the creek', said Alex, quick as a flash.

'Come along, now we'll show your father just where you threw it.'

The wind was biting cold and the winter sun was well-hidden by clouds. Pater hunched his shoulders and glowered, but given a nudge by his wife, tried to play-act loving attention towards the Little Terror.

Alex led the grown-ups and his elder brother Rory down to the wharf.

'I stood on the edge and frew it like this...' he windmilled his small arm at top speed, 'and frew it right out into the miggle!'

'Well, we'll just have to dive for it', said Ern, looking towards Rory. 'Get your clothes off.'

Rory stripped to his knee-length woollen underpants and dived into the freezing water. He porpoised down into the mud several times.

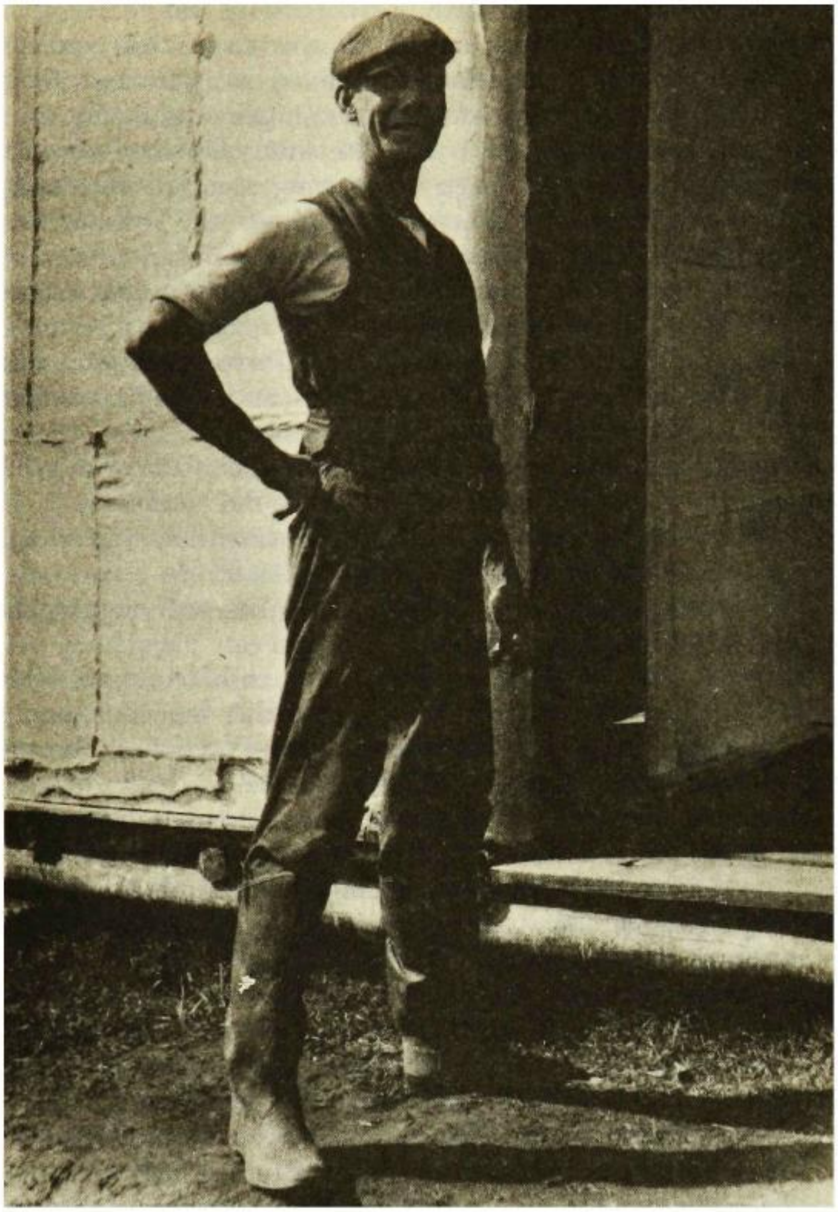
'No! Furver out! Near the miggle!' yelled Alex, now enjoying the fun.

Rory snorted with cold and swam further out. He dived and dived, his hands stirring and sifting the soft mud. His lips were turning blue and his teeth were chattering.

'He's hopeless! I'll just *have* to go in!' announced Ern, the chief of troops. 'Get my swimmers, Chrissie! And the bath-robe . . . and don't forget a couple of towels!'

Uncle Ern was famous for his army bearing, his pukka good looks and his sartorial elegance . . . even in farm clothes. He was also famous for his Victorian primness. None of *his* children were allowed to scamper naked from bath to bedroom. Ern changed in the breezy boat-shed, and emerged in an ankle-length towelling bath-robe that modestly hid his navy and red striped, neck-to-knee bathers.

The great moment for Alex had arrived. 'Now Son, show me *exactly* where you threw that hammer!'



Uncle Ern was famous for his pukka good looks and his sartorial elegance —even in farm clothes.

Alex pointed. Slightly north of where Rory was rummaging through the silt at the bottom of the river. Ern quickly disrobed, stood to attention and dived in. He and Rory explored every inch of the mud bottom, again and again, until they were so cold they had to come in. Aunty Chrissie wrapped them in towels. Through chattering teeth, the army commander considered a new tactic.

'Get that old iron bar from the boathouse, Chrissie! Now my boy, are you *absolutely positive* you stood on the middle of the wharf? Were you facing *straight* out?'

The Little Terror gave it his deep consideration, and decided he was more to the south side . . . and facing a smidgen south.

'Right!' said Uncle Ern. 'Now, I want you to throw out this bit of iron . . . *exactly* the way you threw the hammer!'

Alex did as he was told. And as the missile hit the water, Rory and his father dived in to trace its fall.

It was about this time, that old Mr Tilse, well rugged up, shambled down to the wharf.

'Where's Ern? I just came over to return his hammer.' He rambled on: 'No one was awake at six this morning, and I thought I'd be able to get it back right after breakfast. But the cow calved. Hope it hasn't been a trouble?'

No one quite remembers any details after that. But Alex, sixty years later, still maintains he didn't get his apple pie—and there was a definite thrashing in the air. In fact even now he is quite bitter about the injustice of the whole affair.

Another creek scene involves Mr James. Soon after he finished my canoe, he was asked to make a twelve-foot skiff for Anthony Horderns'. To test his design, he made a model about two feet long. The hull was made of galvanised iron with a dagger-board keel and decking made of varnished three-ply. He whittled the mast and boom, then asked my mother if she would cut and sew the sails. It was a beautiful little craft that sailed perfectly. The blue and white painted hull slid through the water and lifted enchantingly in the breeze. He followed and checked it in his catamaran, I in my canoe. It was a glorious new and unexpected twist to boating that I had never expected.

The model was carefully packed in one of my father's wooden fruit boxes, and sent off to Anthony Horderns' for

approval. The big one would be made entirely of wood. They ordered the first to be built, with probably six more later. And the beautiful model came back with the order.

About four weeks later, I saw Mr James rowing by, towing the skiff. It was finished, the hull highly varnished and glistening in the morning sunlight. I wondered wistfully if he was sending the model back too. Its box lay at his feet. We waved to each other. As usual I spent the day playing on the wharf, so we could chat on his way home. The toady fish were sunning themselves in the muddy shallows. They darted off when the shadow of my hand touched them. Then I collected acorns off the bank and sent a fleet of them to explore the world. With a tiny twig for a mast, one became a model sailing boat in my hand. But it foundered miserably when I launched it. With a bent pin and a length of cotton I fished for toadies. No bait. Finally one took the lure and I scooped him onto the wharf with my hand. It was the first time I'd caught one. He flopped on the wharf, and as I watched he started to puff up. He got bigger and bigger and looked as if he'd burst. It was horribly embarrassing and distressing. So I threw him back, pin, cotton and all. My hands felt slimy, so I wiped them clean down the front of my smock. Pulling the boat closer, I scrambled in and sat in the stern and rocked it. A sailing boat. The daydream hours slipped slowly by.

Finally I caught sight of silver ripples down at Livingstone's Corner. And there was the catamaran oaring its way slowly upstream. As it got closer, I could see the box between Mr James' feet. So he hadn't sent it away! I *would* be able to see it sail again. Perhaps today . . . if I asked politely. He leant on his oars and skilfully moored alongside, smiling. His eyes twinkling under shaggy white eye-brows.

'I've been wondering, all the way back, if one of your dollies would like to go for a sail?' He was more than a mind-reader. 'Not the big lass. We'll need a skipper about so big!' His gnarled, work-stained hands chopped a ten-inch slice of air. 'And one that doesn't mind getting wet.'

'Teddy!' I shouted over my shoulder as I raced up to the house. He was an old hairless bear, well used to twenty years of the rigours of nature. My absolute favourite.

When I got back, the model was on the wharf, fully rigged, and I could see he'd built a new deep, oblong cockpit into the

deck. He put Teddy in, and fixed the rigging so the jib and main worked together, the rudder adjusting as it sailed.

We rowed out on the catamaran and launched the little craft mid-stream. Off she went, sails fluttering for a moment, then she caught the breeze. My spirit went off with Teddy. As he sailed . . . we sailed . . . in slow graceful arcs along the Creek.

'Does the Little Missie like it?' he asked.

I nodded, not taking my eyes off the little boat for a second. It was too beautiful for words.

'Then it's yours', he said, patting me on the shoulder. 'All yours. So you can take your dollies sailing when you go out in the canoe. I made one like that for the Emperor Franz Joseph's children many, many years ago. They sailed it on the big pond. But somehow I think you'll get more fun out of it than they did.'

Mr James was probably right, for that little boat added a whole new dimension to my life. It was unpredictable, full of spirit! It was like a playmate. What long happy hours I spent, racing, swooping and chasing that little gull-like craft. Adjusting the sails so it would go straight, or in great lazy curves. Heading it off when it raced towards shore. Saving the skipper when it capsized. Sailing in tandem to visit the Morgans, where Teddy and I would be invited to morning tea. All in all, it was better than a playmate.



Sometimes I was allowed to take my mother and grandmother for a row.

The Snake-Bead Game

When I was about three, my mother used to spill a handful of bright 'milk-jug' beads into a saucer. With a thick blunt darning needle and a length of wool, she showed me how to thread the beads and make a snake. By pulling the wool, one could make it curl and wiggle like a real one. But snakes were from my father's world, outside.

My father: I can see him so clearly in my mind's eye. Standing by the stove in the morning, stirring his steaming oatmeal porridge, still barefooted but in his work clothes. He wore a grey flannel short-sleeved shirt with narrow white collar-band, buttoned with grey steel buttons, the top two always undone. His trousers were khaki drill, totally secured with a heavy leather belt, and striped braces labelled Chicago Fire Dept on the metal tabs.

The belt had a home-made leather pouch attached, which contained the snake bite kit: Condy's crystals in a small silver phial that unscrewed to reveal the crystals and a small wicked-looking blade. That was the scalpel to cut out the flesh around the bite. 'Down to half an inch deep', my father instructed me. 'And then you must suck out the blood. But remember the snake leaves poison. If it ever happens, you must be sure to spit out the blood. Keep spitting. Don't swallow!'

In the other leather pocket of the kit was a length of plaited twine to use as a tourniquet to stop the blood flow.

'It's most important if a snake bites you', said my father, 'not to get excited! Remember. Don't run. That will send the poison through your body quicker. Tourniquet first, then cut!'

Fortunately we always managed to kill the red-bellied black snakes before they bit anyone.

Whenever my father killed a snake, he used it to train and test me. He never mentioned the killing. The body would be curled across one of the paths through the paddocks that I

scampered along each day. He'd casually mention to my mother, in my hearing, that he'd seen a snake: 'You'd better keep your eyes on the ground. You don't want to step on one.'

In the early days I blithely skipped over the thing three or four times in a day before my father made me walk that path with him. I remember the most dramatic denouement that finally taught me to 'see snakes'.

He was walking in front of me, barefooted, suggesting I look for plovers' eggs in the grass. To my absolute horror I saw his bare foot step right on the long twisted body of a shiny black snake. My father bitten by a snake! My beautiful father—hurt! His vulnerable white foot and ankle only a handspan from its head. The impact was terrifying. Much more dramatic and frightening than if I had stepped on it. What a brilliant bit of visual teaching.

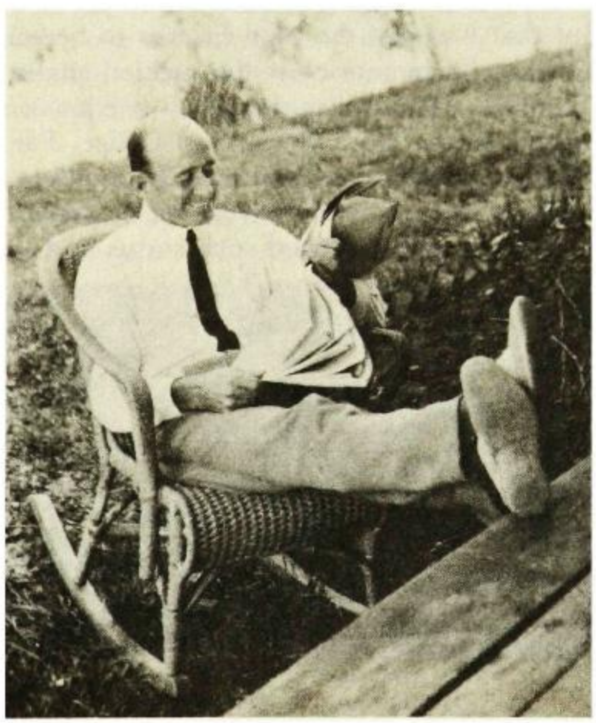
From that day onwards I had an 'eye' for snakes. Rather similar to getting an eye for fossils. In the beginning it seems impossible to pick them out. They are so subtle, they're invisible to the untrained eye. Then something clicks, and suddenly you can pick them out yards away. I was recently driving out west, and spotted faint leaf fossils in a road cutting, at 140 k. I stopped the car, reversed and, sure enough, I hadn't lost my 'eye'.

My father went everywhere with his snake-stick. It was an oak sapling about one and a half inches thick, polished smooth from years of being carried in his hands. It had a good hefty feel and could be swung in a lethal arc of about six feet. Many's the snake whose back it broke. These were always finally brought home and laid belly up on the back veranda. With great care we would count the red scales from the mouth down towards the belly. If the pattern went in one formula, it was deadly poisonous. If in another it was harmless, and my father seemed sorry he'd killed it. But of course there was no time for counting before the killing. The pattern detail was minute, and occurred only a hand-span from the chin.

Quick snake killing was an art, and each farmer had his own technique. I remember one expert who cracked them like a stock whip! Spectacular and nerve-shattering to watch. He had to attack with the speed of lightening, grip the snake by the tail and fling it high in the air—nothing short of herculean when it was a thick six-foot black snake. Then with a marvellous



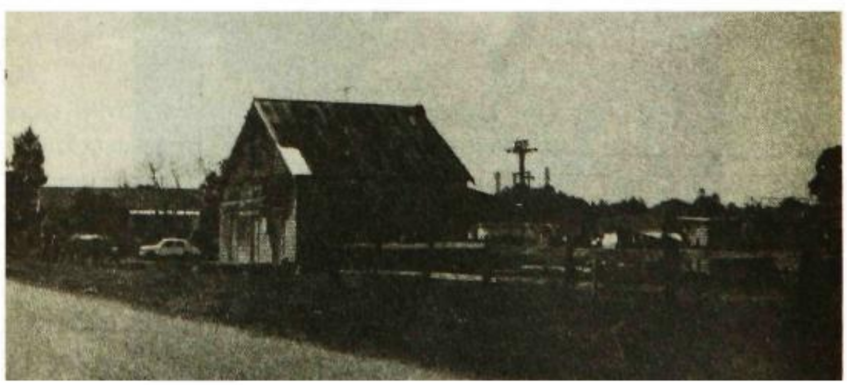
My mother . . . and father.



swish twice round his head and a flip of his wrist, he'd crack its backbone just behind the head. No one else in the district was game to try his method. If you failed first go, it was an extremely tricky situation to cope with.

My father told his childhood story of a black snake that crawled on to the bed, where he and his younger brother were asleep. They were about nine and five years old. It was pitch dark and he woke as the snake was crawling across the bed and curling up on his chest. Imagine the terror! It was like a heavy black pancake on his night-shirt, its head by his neck. He didn't dare call out or move in case he frightened it. It would strike. He couldn't wake his brother, because young Hector thrashed about when he woke up. And *that* would certainly frighten the snake. He knew well they only attacked when frightened. He didn't dare go to sleep, because he may roll over and that would disturb it. So all night long he lay awake, without moving a finger, just watching the sleeping snake. As the first greyness of dawn showed in the window, the snake uncoiled and glided off the bed. Then you can imagine there was bedlam in the house. My father was the hero of the family. What incredible bravery, control and character in a little boy of nine. But that was just the man he was to become.

Among the snake memories is the pickled snake with two tails. It lay coiled, dark and murky, in a big jar of metho on the high counter at the Dora Creek Post Office. Fat, bald Mr Harpur collected things besides letters. In another age, with better education, he'd probably have been a museum curator. But would he ever have achieved such status and local fame?



Just up from the Post Office.

People brought him all their oddities, large and small, for him to pickle and set on show. The little post office had jars everywhere. They were lined along the counter, leaving just enough elbow room for stamp sales. There were jars balanced on top of the big wooden letter-rack, with its A to WXYZ compartments. There were jars on the dusty window sills that were peppered with dead blow-flies. More jars littered the bench where the telegram forms were kept. What a collection!

The biggest was an embryo calf with two heads. There was a frog with a short stubby tail left over from its tadpole days. A snake with a bulge inside reputed to be Charlie Seaton's pullet. I remember gazing at an octopus with ten arms . . . the head of a flathead fish with only one eye set in the middle of its forehead . . . a super tarantula spider, rather crumpled now, but said to have been as big as a man's hand. There was a set of shark's jaws, bleached and gleaming white, with rows and rows of frightful teeth . . . and even a human embryo (probably an incipient Seaton). Someone chopped off their toe, and that was passed in reverently for Mr Harpur's collection. What gruesome treasures. But it made 'collecting the mail' vastly exciting. I never tired of the experience as Mr Harpur always brought down one of his special treasures, to let me see it close up, near the light of the window. One had to hold the jars very still. If you wobbled them, a dark sludge rose and clouded the view.

My dearest wish was to find one of Mother Nature's weird mistakes. Something worthy of taking its place among Mr Harpur's pickle jars. Why couldn't one of our chickens have four legs? Or two heads? Or no beak? I waited hopefully for each batch to hatch out. But alas they were all perfect, every time.

Stringing together the snake-beads of memory, there pops to mind Mr Terry O'Toole, who arrived in the district about 1930 during the worst of the Depression. He was an itinerant farmhand looking for any sort of work. O'Toole spoke with a strong brogue that made his talk hard to understand. He was good with horses, had a great sense of humour and a store of stories about the Green Isle. But he was terrified of snakes. Petrified would perhaps be a better word. 'There's nar one o' the devils in t' whole o' the Green Isle, tank the Lord', he'd say.

Now Mr Russell had horses and a big well-rounded Irish wife. So it wasn't long before Terry O'Toole was bunked down in the sulky shed and working for Mr Russell. And it wasn't long before Terry O'Toole stepped on his first snake. Six days in fact. He was so terrified he couldn't move.

'I jest stood t'ere agrindin' me heel into t'ting, an rolled me a smoke. Begorrah, me insides were jelly, 'n' me hands were shakin', but I couldna move. Recon t'was about a whole year later t'at I got that smoke in me mouth an' lit.'

Terry crossed himself: 'By the Oly Saints, tis an absolute fact, I jest stood t'ere grindin' me heel into the bastard. Puffing 'n' tryin' to count the stars. I tell you, t'at cigarette took forever to smoke. When it burned down to me fingers, I jest trew it away an' walked home.'

'Well you must have been standing on the right end, or you'd be dead', said Mr Russell.

'By God, I don't know what part I was standing on. There's no way I could bring meself to look at it, I can tell you. I niver want to set eyes on a snake dead or alive. They're the work o't Devil and there's not one in the whole of Ireland from County Kerry to Cork. 'Tis a God-forsaken land 'n' I'll be going home right this day!'

And he did. Mr Russell drove him to Morriset in the buggy to catch the afternoon train. Six months later Mrs Russell received a picture postcard of Dublin from Mr Terry O'Toole.

Actually O'Toole must have had rather bad stars that week, while he was working at Russell's. One of the horses had lockjaw pretty badly and was lying on its side. My father and Mr Morgan used to go over morning and evening to help Mr Russell and O'Toole roll the horse over onto a fresh bracken-fern bed. The first evening it was dark, and the horse had collapsed down near the creek bank. The three men were stacking the bracken, while Terry O'Toole stood on a slight rise smoking a cigarette and giving instructions. Well it was the end of a busy day, and the bull-ants took a while to stir themselves and get the intruder off their nest. They must have been quiet about it because when they attacked there must have been about thirty ants well entrenched in O'Toole's trousers. With an almighty yell, he leapt into the creek, cigarette and all.

'Silly coot!' said my father when he came home. 'That'll teach him to stand back when there's work to be done.'

The Secret Garden

Today my city garden is a secret place, shrouded green with leopard trees, tree ferns and tropical vines that scatter their blossoms in the pool. There's a princely frog, satin-green and sleek, who arrives every evening to sit in the network of vine ropes. He dines al fresco above my door, and sings throatily between courses of gnats and moths.

It is all an echo of childhood and my mind wanders into that other secret place . . . with its tiny pool where lions and tigers crept through the tall kikuyu grass. It was my favourite place, away from the eyes of grown-ups, shared only with a fat green frog and Jack, the dog. He dozed on the bare earth under the house and kept a watchful eye on me. The secret place was on the south side of the house. It was always shady and cool. The grass was deep and soft to lie in, with a rich earthy smell tinged with the honey sweetness of white clover. Often I made clumsy chains of clover blossoms to wear on my head and round my neck. They became giant golden tiger lilies the second I put them on, and alone in the stillness I became a Wild Princess, just like the one from Peter Pan. Then the magic adventures of my mind began.

The Jungle Pool was only eight inches across, dark . . . and filled with sweet clear water that dripped from the gutter overhead. In fact it was the constant drips over the years that had made my pool.

Before retreating to my secret place, I always ransacked the toy box and filled my cotton skirt with tiny things: lead lions and tigers, a celluloid elephant and giraffe, a little wooden chalet with its carved man and woman, a miniature pram with a real fabric hood, the thumb-sized baby. There were some oriental wise men with bright flowing robes, leftovers from an ancient nativity scene. Paper was also very important. With it I would fold a flotilla of tiny boats to sail on the pool which was

then transformed into a mysterious lake in darkest Africa. Just like the one in my father's book about Dr Livingstone.

On the swampy edges of *my* lake were little insect-eating plants, pinkish with flat daisy leaves clothed in long honey-dew hairs. To communicate, I'd carefully put my finger on one leaf and it would curl up and try to hold me. Lovingly. Sometimes I would feed it, definitely my friend, with a succulent mosquito or a struggling ant. Then the magic hours of adventure would drift and swirl around me.

The whole world was mine. I could arrive at the lake after travelling down the Zambezi by raft . . . or through the jungle with Dr Livingstone. It could be an ice-bound lake high in the Swiss alps, like the postcards my aunt sent. Or something biblical like the Red Sea, to be parted by Moses . . . or the Nile with a baby lurking in the bullrushes. What a delicious world! Where anything you dream can happen . . . until mother calls you for tea.

Tea of jelly and custard, a tomato sandwich of thin brown bread cut into wedges and a fresh juicy fig off the tree. The fig had to be eaten with great care, so you didn't burn your lips on the skin. You'd break it open and twist it inside-out so the pink 'grubs' could be sucked off the skin. Then with your teeth, you'd pare down the sweet juicy pith until the dark purple skin started to show. That meant painful danger was at hand. Eating figs was a skill early learnt . . . with tears.

Such fruits of childhood! Every year, the first Elberta peach to ripen was mine to eat. My father would carry me on his shoulder, through the summery orchard each day. We'd check how the fruit was ripening. I remember the prickle of his grey flannel shirt under my legs, the sweat of his forehead under my hands. There was always one special peach that appeared a week, two weeks early. We would check each day if it was ready to pick. It seemed to take so long, to turn from gold to blushy pink. I remember that delicious moment when my baby-teeth broke through the downy fur . . . into the golden flesh . . . sweet . . . warm from the sun. The juice trickled everywhere. Down my chin, over my frock . . . through my fingers and dripped down my arms to my elbows. My father would fish out his big red spotted handkerchief and mop me clean.

Beyond the myopic perimeters of this tender golden world,

architect Burley Griffin was creating his own dream-world for Australia's capital city. The new Parliament House was opened by Royal newly-weds, the Duke and Duchess of York. A newly minted two shilling piece of heavy shining silver, richly engraved and in high relief, is my only memory of the event. I still treasure the coin. Strangely, in the same month, the ACTU was formed. And somewhere about that time, a small squawling Bob Hawke was due to enter the world. Nice timing.

Three Fairies and a Tiger

Without children to play with, my life at five was peopled with others. I had three fairies who lived by a big swampy puddle in the first paddock. They were only there in the early morning. So I would scamper out through the wet grass to talk to them before breakfast. The air was dewy and the early shadows stretched across the grass. The fairies sparkled in the grass like diamonds. They told me their names were Bluebelle, Pinkbelle and Snowbelle. Sometimes I would find a circle of toadstools where they had partied the night before. One night I asked my mother if I could write them a letter and leave it by the big puddle. My father and I went out hand in hand, with the hurricane lamp and the letter. I left it very carefully under a small stone.

Imagine my utter delight the next morning when I found my letter gone. In its place were three tiny envelopes. One pink, one blue and one white! Each with a tiny letter neatly folded inside. The writing was so small I had to read it with a magnifying glass. We exchanged letters often, the fairies and I. I have them still in my memory box. And the writing looks very, very like my father's.

My other friend was a giant tiger, who followed me everywhere during the day. He was magnificent, with a roar that would frighten the living daylights out of any other animal we met, such as elephants and bunyips and crocodiles that chanced to cross our path. He was a very reassuring friend in daylight. But night-time was a different matter. I used to park him by the breadcrock behind the curtain in the kitchen hall.

When darkness came, he became horribly ferocious. His shadow danced frighteningly on the wall when I ran past the curtain with my own little hurricane lamp. My parents would pull the curtains back, bring the bright pressure lamp and show me that he certainly wasn't there. But I *knew*! And it was pure

agony when they insisted that I walk *slowly* past the curtain. 'Don't run, child!'

My mother suggested that Tiger would be safer sleeping outside under the tank-stand. It seemed an excellent idea. I'd settle him there every afternoon at sunset. But somehow, by nightfall, he'd slink inside to reside ferociously beside the breadcrock, behind the curtain. It was a fearsome period of my life. Perhaps, as Carl Jung says, 'When things are idyllic, man has to create his own balance of fear.'



My giant tiger lay under the tree, purring. . .

The Graveleys' Fire

Mr and Mrs Graveley were city folk who'd bought the farm at the edge of our south orchard. He was paunchy fat and bald, and gave the impression of bloated greyness, except for his nose. His breath was always boozy and he wheezed when he climbed the back stairs to their high-set house. It was a big old colonial, weatherboards grey and faded as Mr Graveley himself.

Mrs Graveley, on the other hand, was very bright and flashy, in the 1928 manner. Flapper frocks and high-heeled shoes that buttoned wickedly across her instep.

They had no children and I was always welcome. Mr Graveley would let me shoot his pea-rifle and help feed the few chickens that lived under the house. Mrs Graveley plied me with Minties from a big colored glass jar on the sideboard. She had a hoard of party balloons in the drawer, surprisingly. And each time I went, she would blow one up for me. Then she'd take me round the house and show me all the pretty things: her clothes, her glossy shoes, the glass-domed clock, the venetian glass vases and the new portable sewing machine with flowers painted on the side.

My mother and father seldom saw them, but I was a regular visitor. Until one day they told me to go away, they were busy. I fed the chickens, accepted a Mintie and trudged home feeling slightly guilty as unwanted children do.

It was a few days later when Mrs Graveley came to ask my father if they could borrow the boat. 'My Alf's going to send some dressed chooks to market', she said brightly.

The boat went by next day. It was low in the water and loaded high with packing cases.

'Enough there to send off 200 chooks', said my father. 'That'll bring them in a deal of money.'

'But they only had eight pullets', I said.

Three nights later, we were woken up at midnight by a great thumping on the side of the house. Mrs Graveley was screaming: 'Fire! Fire! The house is on fire!'

The night was lit by an orange glow. We could see Mrs Graveley's beautifully made-up face, her bright lipsticked mouth in anguish, her marcelled hair neat and chic. The flames and sparks lept into the dark night sky beyond our orchard. It was spectacular... Terrifying!... Beautiful! And the night was filled with the drama of Mrs Graveley, in her red flapper dress with matching ankle-strap shoes, weeping most theatrically, and calling for 'A port ... or just a little sherry dear? That will quieten me!'

Mr and Mrs Graveley slept at our house, and left early next morning after a bright and hearty breakfast. They looked immaculate and had neatly packed suitcases. Mrs Graveley explained that she had just had the presence of mind to throw them down the front steps, just clear of the fire. They planned to stay with relatives in Strathfield. My father rowed them down to Dora Creek Station to catch the Sydney train.

'Strange', said my mother, 'You'd have thought they'd have tried to salvage something!'

So when my father came back, we all walked over to the scene of the fire. The once beautiful house was a black charred skeleton. Here and there we could recognise remnants of the Graveley's furniture. The burnt-out sideboard, springs from the lounge, the twisted iron bedstead and wire mattress. We poked among the ashes. There was one pair of Mrs Graveley's many shoes. The black patent ones with worn-down heels. But where were the others?

And where was the portable sewing machine? That couldn't have melted in the fire.

'You might find some melted glass', my father suggested. 'Let's look for all those coloured vases.'

We poked through the ashes under the bedroom and sitting room. Not a sign of melted glass. Not even the metal top off the Mintie jar. Not even any charred and broken plates. Not a trace of the silver spoons and forks.

'Strange...' said my mother. 'One would expect to find even some of the hooks from the coat hangers.'

'Very strange', agreed my father. 'Why here's the hen coop that was under the house and it's filled with five roast pullets.'

'They must have eaten the other three', I said.

A few weeks later, a city man got off the train at Dora Creek. He walked the four miles along the creek track to our place. He looked hot and sweaty when he arrived. His shirt was crumpled and his tie was loosened.

'Do the Graveleys live near here?' he asked.

'Oh, their house burned down a while ago', said my mother. 'They've gone back to Sydney.'

'I know', he said. 'I'm from the insurance company.'

'Mrs Graveley used to give me Minties, but we couldn't f. . .'

'That's enough, Barbara! Don't interrupt the grown-ups! Yes . . . yes, the Graveleys are lucky to be alive. Nearly burnt in their beds in that dreadful fire. Lost everything. All their furniture! But of course they didn't have much else, poor things.'

Then my father offered to row the man back to Dora Creek Station. The train was due in an hour. He really didn't have time to see the ruins. There was nowhere to stay in Dora Creek overnight if he missed the train.

Country people in those days, as now, gave little away to strangers from the city.

The Getting of Knowledge

The orchard was a place where the seasons came and went with great charm. In winter when the winds blew, the air would be filled with the scent of lemon and orange blossom. It was then my father pruned the apple trees. He high up on the ladder, me below picking up the waxy twigs. And all the time we played this marvellous game.

My father would call down: 'If our twelve hens laid two eggs each, and you had three for breakfast, how many eggs would we have?'

'If Arnold Morgan picked eight cases of nectarines and sold them down at Belmont for three shillings a case, how much would he give to Mrs Morgan?' (We all knew she looked after the money.)

'Now Mr Russell has six horses over there. If he gets fifteen more thoroughbreds to spell next week, how many will be in the paddock?'

'Uncle Frank has 120 lemon trees. If each tree has thirty lemons, how many will he have to pack? Right, 3600. Now each case holds 200 lemons. How many cases will he have to sell?'

The game went on and on all day, about people I knew. I enjoyed every second of it, and didn't even know I was doing mental arithmetic.

There was a time when my mother had to go to Sydney to see the doctor. She had been very sick. I was only six and wept bitter tears when she went. 1929 wasn't a very good year anywhere. . . Wall Street, New York, was just as depressed as 'Illaroo', Dora Creek.

We were on the breakfast verandah. My father was trying desperately to console me. He was alone, probably for the first time in his married life, and very worried about his wife. He suddenly stood and picked up a big green jam melon lying in the corner.

'Hey! Would you like to see where you live?' he asked.

'I'm here!' I sobbed.

'But do you know exactly where *here* is? I bet you didn't even know you lived on a very big jam melon, did you?'

That concept sounded interesting, so I sniffed away the tears. He reached in his trouser pocket and pulled out his fat bone-handled pen-knife. Carefully he eased out the spike-that-was-for-getting-stones-out-of-horses'-hooves. He didn't often use that, so it seemed like something exciting was about to happen.

He rolled the jam melon so its stalk end faced us.

'That's the South Pole', he said. 'That's where the cold southerlies come from.'

Then he scratched the map of Australia into position. Next the states were divided off. Each one named and repeated by me. Finally he marked a small cross half-way up the coast of New South Wales.

'That's where you are right at this moment. And that mark there is Sydney, where your mother is going.'

It seemed very close to the cross and I felt very reassured. Not the thickness of my little finger away!

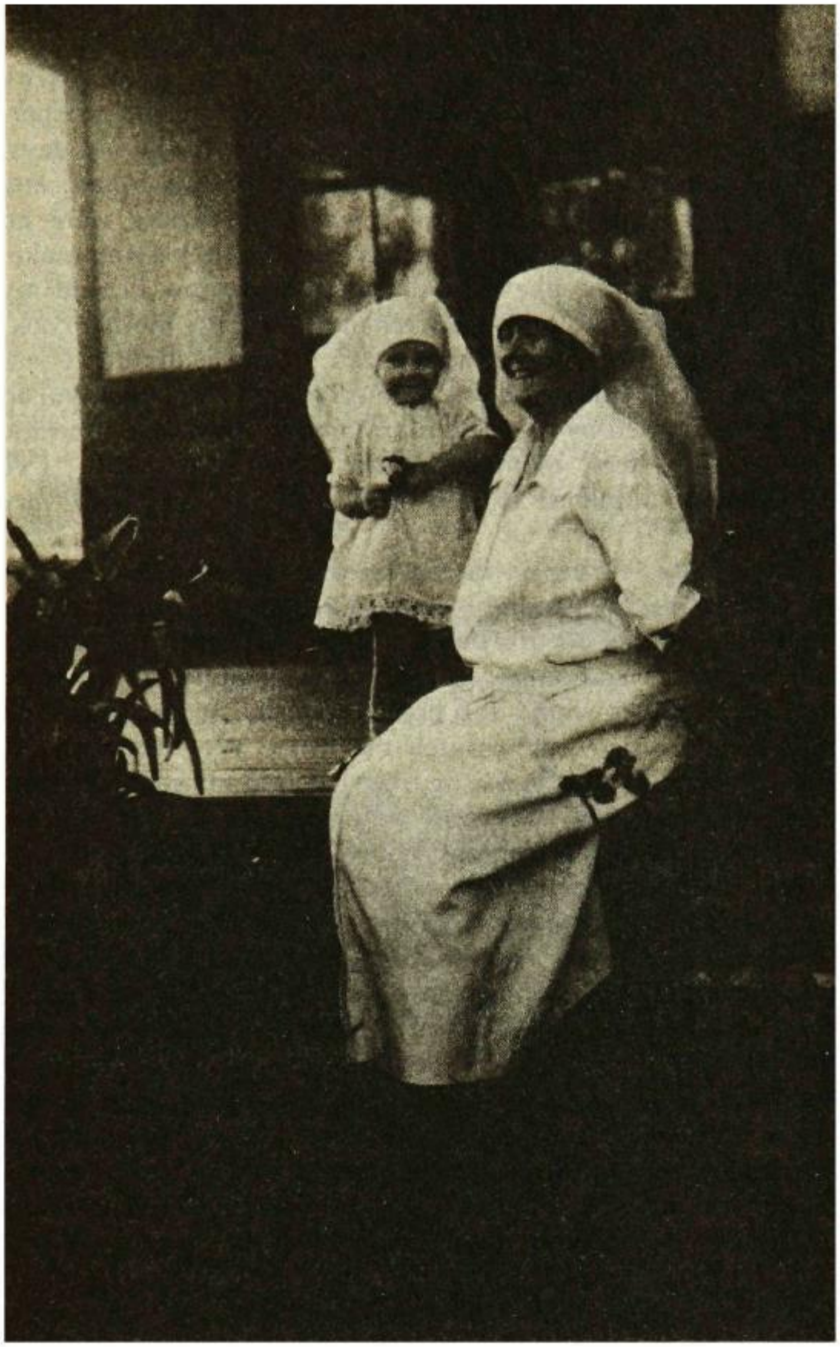
'Now, that jam melon is your very own world. We'll add another country after each meal. New Guinea tonight, and tomorrow America. North *and* South!'

What a fantastic man to have for a father! He and I then had this new game of countries and oceans and capital cities. I was launched into geography. I still prefer the old names he taught me: St Petersburg instead of Moscow and Constantinople instead of Istanbul.

Having the jam melon world for my very own, it obviously had to be peopled with kings and queens and wonderful stories. History and dates! Just another wonderful game to play.

Who else has felt the poignant sadness for Queen Anne who had nineteen babies, yet only one lived? And even he died before his mother. My father had his old 1890 history book and showed me a picture of her. She wore strings of pearls entwined in her thick dark hair and had large soulful eyes. Poor sad lady.

I could identify with Queen Anne's disappointment, because I had a little sister who died three days after she was born. As was usual in 1925, Joan was born at home with a nurse in attendance. I have a clear memory of baby Joan as a quiet little



Nurse Wallace, the midwife who welcomed my sister Joan into the world —for her brief stay.

swaddled doll, waxy perfect with beautiful long black curly hair. When she was bathed by Nurse Wallace I puzzled over the broad flannel binding round her stomach and the tiny cork in her navel. If she'd lived she'd have had a perfect pooper-inner like mine. That's how they achieved it in the old days.

Joan passed briefly through my life at two-and-a-half, and her memory disappeared until I was four. There were no children to play with. So I spent my early years playing make-believe, or trotting like a small talkative shadow behind my father as he worked, or in the kitchen helping my mother cook.

One night when I was about four, I had a dream. I was standing in the sunlight down on our landing and a boat pulled up. It was rowed by a young man in white shirt and trousers. He had bare feet, blond hair and a beard. He said: 'I've brought you someone to play with. But she can't stay very long.'

Then I saw, sitting on the back seat of the row boat, a little girl about two. The sunlight rimmed her wispy blonde hair. He lifted her out on to the bank and we wandered off to play. I felt so secure and happy with her. I showed her all my toys, my secret places round the house. We lay in the grass and looked down the well to watch the frogs. We swung on the special sitting-branch in the fig tree. I shared my small daytime joys with her. Then the blond man called us. It was time for her to go, he said. I woke in tears, sobbing.

As usual my mother made me wake up properly and tell her all about the 'nightmare', so I could sleep peacefully again.

When I think of it now, as I'm writing, I weep to think of the sadness it must have woken in her heart. After that night, Joan became one of the family. We used to talk about her and make believe she was there. When my mother and I played 'Being in England Again' . . . like catching the double-decker horse-drawn bus . . . going to the music hall . . . or riding the ferry to the Isle of Man . . . we would move up and leave room on the veranda step for Joan. Is it any wonder I believe in life-after-death and reincarnation?

The Dolls' House

There was an absolute trusting innocence about my childhood. If my parents told me something . . . it was the truth. I wasn't brought up in a teasing, leg-pulling family. So when the big doll's house appeared on the veranda, on my fifth birthday, it was a complete and utter heart-thumping surprise.

About two weeks before, the new fold-up bed had arrived from Anthony Horderns'. It was a metal contraption on



wheels, that came in a huge knotty pine crate. About four feet square and two big hand-spans deep. I could stand in it. I dragged in bits and pieces of doll's furniture and it made a wonderful cubby for a few days.

Then one day my father brought in his tools and asked me to move everything out. He laid the crate flat on the floor and started measuring it up.

'What are you doing?'

'I'm going to make a tool-box', he said.

So I sat round and watched and passed him nails. The four compartments were enormous.

'That's too big for tools. They'll get muddled', I explained. 'Why don't you put in some *little* boxes?'

'Might be a good idea. I'll think about it!' he said, and went on nailing up the partitions.

My urging for smaller and smaller compartments finally became a problem. So my mother left her sewing and came out. (She'd been flat out on the treadle-machine for days. 'Don't stand so close, you worry me', she kept saying and shooing me outside.)

'That would make a beautiful cupboard for my linen, Malcolm.'

'You can have it!' he said in a relieved tone. 'But I really think it should be painted.'

So I watched enchanted as she got to work with the sand-paper and paint.

'I'd like each section a different color!' she said. 'Would you like to pick the colors, Bab?'

So we spent a happy day mixing a bit of roof paint with white to get soft pink . . . green boat paint with white to get a mossy green . . . and brown guttering paint with white to get a biscuit shade. One compartment was white. The linen cupboard looked really rather gay when we'd finished. Then my mother painted the outside shiny white. She kept testing the paint with her finger. Next day when it was really dry, she folded a few sheets and towels and put them into place.

'Now you go out and play!' She gave a knowing, conspiratorial smile. 'I've got some more sewing to do!'

As it was only a day before my birthday, I thought perhaps she was making me a new frock.

I wandered down to the boat and day-dreamed in the sun.

I'd be *five* tomorrow! Incredibly grown-up! I was four *today* and five *tomorrow*. I wondered if I'd feel a drastic change? Like a sneeze into new awareness. So I tried to remember my last birthday. FOUR? That was the time I was given Marjorie. The big doll. The bane of my life. We were exactly the same height, when I got her. Marjorie had a heavy oversized head. When I picked her up, her plump cloth body slumped forward and she always gave me a stunning blow on the forehead. When I staggered back, she always had that same horrid smug smile on her fat face. I hated her! With deep anger and frustration. So *that* was the immediate change from three years to four years!

What about two and three? That birthday I could remember clearly. Three candles on a cake and I was sitting in a high chair. We were all there, Aunty Max too, in a great big restaurant. And we rode in lifts. The lifts made my tummy feel awful when they went down. So maybe that was the big change? I'd never been in a lift before and it happened on my birthday.

My second birthday was harder to remember. But I knew Grandma had given me Heffelump, and I dimly remembered him appearing out of white tissue paper, in his brown-check splendour, trunk, big ears and all. That was when I changed from one to two.



Heffelump guards the dolls' house.

Before that I was only one! One year old? That wasn't very long at all. In fact it was quite a shattering thought. It became quite clear, that certainly not long ago, I wasn't even here! Five wasn't old at all.

On the morning of my fifth birthday, the linen cupboard had turned into a dolls' house. A huge dolls' house . . . as tall as I was. Four rooms. All furnished, with lino on the floors. Curtains on the windows framed bright views of Swiss mountains and lakes for the dolls to look out on. I recognised the scenes from last year's Brown Boveri calendar. There was a kitchen with a stove, table and chairs, plates and saucepans, everything. A sitting room with basket chairs, a dresser and even an afternoon-tea table laid for visitors! A bedroom, with a new baby in a bassinet by the big bed. The bed had pillows and a real eiderdown over the lace spread. Downstairs was the bathroom with a tiled bath and a washstand, complete with jug and basin. Even towels hanging on the rail. And somehow, in the night, the linen cupboard had grown a bright red roof . . . just like a real house!

My fifth birthday was certainly something to remember . . . all my life. But it left me forever with that unanswered question: where was I before? Where were you before?

When my first-born was nineteen months old, in the days pre-television, he stunned us one morning. It was at that stage when toddlers get by with a few basic phrases, like: Me want . . . Yes . . . No . . . Mummy . . . Da-da Choot-choot . . . Bow-wow . . . This morning, over breakfast, he started talking in long clear sentences. For about ten minutes. It was about aeroplanes and bombing missions. About a holiday by the sea and sirens and bombs falling. How he'd run to hide in a church and the bombs kept falling. Then the church wall fell down. It was as though he was reliving the experience. (The exact experience I'd read in a letter from a friend who was killed in the war twelve years before.)

When the brief story was over, he reverted to baby-talk. He never spoke that lucidly again, constructing long sentences, until he was about three and a half. And then he always talked about everyday things. Perhaps *he* knew *exactly* where he'd been before! I'd like to think so.

The Children's Summer

When I was five, my mother used to get regular letters from her younger sister, Amy, who lived in Yenda down in the Riverina. All through summer the letters told of heat and dust storms. Red dust storms that blew for a week. Dust that came over the western horizon like a huge swirling red curtain. Wind that battered and rattled the closed windows and doors.

Impossible heat that roasted the house made the imprisoned children cranky and fractious. Finally it brought them out in spots and itches. The fine dust filtered through the door cracks and window casements. It covered the polished floor boards. It misted over the fringed carpets. It sifted over the lino so thickly the gay pattern disappeared. It covered the furniture within half an hour of dusting.

Summer life was intolerable in the Riverina for women and children. Unpleasant for the menfolk, but there was still work to be done—money to be earned. So summer of '29 (when I was six), and two summers after that, my father's brother Mac sent his wife (my mother's sister) and their three children to stay with us at Dora Creek. Summers were a cool and pleasant time in the shady Wallum country by Lake Macquarie. Breezes blew in from the ocean, fifteen miles away.

There was a photograph in our album that showed Jean and me as babies at our joint christening. So we, at least, had met once. There was a coloured photograph of Roderick, aged two, in a striped knitted suit complete with a cap with a pompom on the top. But the suit dominated the child. John was represented in several smiley, squinty, sunny snap-shots. But it was impossible for me to imagine them as real children.

The excitement of their coming was excruciating. What would they be like? The fourteen days till their arrival was an eternity. How would they come?

'Your Uncle Mac will drive them to Sydney. Then they'll catch the express.'

'How far is it?'

'Well, it's about 350 miles from Yenda to Sydney. Then eighty miles to Dora Creek. Can you work that out?'

'Four hundred and thirty miles! That's a long, *long* way! How long will it take?'

'Questions! Questions! Knowing your Uncle Mac, they'll get to Sydney in about twelve hours.' (Not bad for a 1928 Vauxhall but Uncle Mac was a wild driver.)

'And it's four hours from Sydney to Dora Creek. They're coming on the midday train.'

'Can I come down to the station to meet them?'

'No. There won't be room in the boat. Amy and the children and their luggage will fill it from stem to stern. You'll have to wait.'

'One extra hour!' The longest hour of my life. Children! Children! My very own double cousins. Almost brothers and sisters! How could I wait one extra hour?

'Well I suppose she could meet you down at Livingstone's Corner in the canoe', suggested my mother.

So when my father set off down the creek to meet the train, my mother and I sat on the veranda steps. We listened for the train to blow its whistle before crossing the Dora Creek bridge. That was the cue for me to leave. I scampered down to the landing, unhitched the canoe, clambered in and paddled like mad towards Livingstone's Corner.

I could see my father's heavily laden boat chug-chugging slowly back from the Bridge. Ripples disturbed the mirror-calm of the river and slopped against the bank. When the boat reached Molly's Rock I broke all rules and paddled past the corner to meet them.

But what a let down! Little John was asleep. Roderick was sullen and cranky. He'd been sick on the train. Jean was shy and subdued. They were all very tired. They'd come all the way from Yenda by train after all. They had been travelling for over twenty-four hours. Only my Aunty Amy was bright and cheery and talkative. But I wasn't interested. She was only a grown-up. I paddled alongside all the way home, hoping the children would suddenly revive and want to play.

It was a long, dreary, listless day. The children were packed off to bed for a sleep. My mother and Aunty Amy sat over cups of tea and talked as only sisters do, when they haven't seen

each other for five years. So my father took me off to 'help' with the ploughing and play our favourite game 'mental arithmetic'.

It wasn't till the next morning that I met my double cousins. At sun-up we were rubbing the sleep out of our eyes, chattering, laughing . . . showing each other recent scabs and scars. Each scar had a heroic story of past accidents and fights. New teeth and missing ones were compared. Most exciting, we all had double-jointed thumbs . . . an exclusive and prized inheritance from the Alcorn Clan. There was such a lot to learn about each other.

Not having lived with brothers, I was vastly intrigued to find John and Roderick had 'little tassles' in front.

'Why had Jean and I missed out?'

'That's because you are both girls', said Aunty Amy, 'and they're boys like your father.'

What an incredible bit of information. I immediately realised I had two boy dolls—Roderick and Alfred—and that



My doll Roderick was singularly unequipped with his vital equipment of a 'tassle'.

they were singularly unequipped. So Jean and I asked for needle, cotton and an old sock. We spent our first morning together happily sewing 'little tassles' between Roderick and Alfred's soft cloth-covered legs. I also added the vital equipment to my brown checked Heffelump. The boys watched us with interest and a certain amount of pride in the masculine gender. They said it was a very handy thing to have, because boys could pee further than girls. This was later put to the test and proved to be absolutely true. I felt a little cheated at being a girl. But Jean said *she* didn't care, because *we* could have babies. And the boys *couldn't*. 'So there! They're not so clever after all.'

After the first day, I forgot about the vital differences. Roderick and John's tassles, like Milly Shawnessy's big scar, faded into oblivion. They were children, the same as me. We were all the same. We laughed at the same things, played the same games, shared the same secrets, wrestled and fought with the same gusto . . . and all wept bitter tears when we were hurt.

The only difference was that I could swim like a fish . . . and they could run much faster than I could. Life is more competitive when there are three children in the family. We had races and I always lost miserably.

Living by the river, swimming was a survival skill. Jean could swim a bit, but the boys couldn't swim at all. Not only that. They couldn't even float as well as girls. Perhaps it was that small extra weight they had to carry around. Anyway the first weeks of that summer were spent in swimming lessons.

My father collected six red treacle tins and soldered the lids so they were guaranteed air-tight. My mother and Aunty Amy made three harnesses out of strong unbleached calico. Each had two wing-like bags at the shoulder-blades to hold a treacle tin. Finally the harnesses were fitted. Pins marked where the front buckles would go. Then my mother let us search her 'button box' to find three strong brass belt buckles and three big brass curtain rings.

The buckles were firmly sewn on the front with bright colored thread. A hole was eyeletted with the bone-handled embroidery spike. Then embroidered with bright buttonhole stitch. Red for John, blue for Roderick and green for Jean. (All our clothes were colour identified with little crosses sewn inside. It avoided squabbles over whose was whose.)

Lastly the curtain rings were attached to the back of the harness. My father brought a big hank of light rope over from the barn. He stood Jean, Roderick and John in a line, then paced out seven yards. He stood me exactly on that spot. The rope was unravelled and one end was put in John's hand. I held the other tight, and my father got out his bone-handled pocket knife to cut the rope. When three lengths had been cut to size, we sat and watched as he roved the ends, carefully plaiting the strands back into the twist of rope. He let us all try to rove an end. We understood clearly enough, but our small fingers couldn't accomplish the neatness and tightness.

Now the ropes were ready. They were tied and lashed to the curtain rings. Red treacle tins inserted, the harnesses were then buckled onto three eager children. What a mad scramble down the bank to the landing! Ropes trailing, everyone yelling.

My beautiful father was a quiet scholarly man, who kept us enchanted, amused and totally enthralled with things of the mind and skills of the hand. But the outrageous excitement and pent-up energy of the long 'harness wait' broke all our conventions. We screamed and pranced on the landing: 'Me first! Me first!'

'They're *completely* out of control!' said my mother. 'There'll be *tears* if we don't stop them. There's *always* tears when they get *that* excited. Amy! You must *do* something!'

So down swooped sweet little Aunty Amy, using all the formidable techniques she'd learnt as a nursing sister at St Vincent's ... plus her indomitable Curtis forefinger. It crooked wickedly inwards at the first joint when she was angry. 'Stop this *instant*! You'll lose all your "good marks" in one go, if you don't quieten down this *instant*!'

We froze! That meant no pocket money at the end of the week. No threepence! Not even a halfpenny! Of course we seldom got the full amount. We started each week with a credit of twelve good marks, valued at a farthing each. Usually we managed to clear a penny or a penny-halfpenny each if we were extremely careful to be good ... or not get caught.

If John the youngest, aged four, got hurt or came home crying, we all lost a mark on principle. Very, very clever politics, because he would lose a mark too. However at times he became a fiendish little despot with all this blackmail power. I remember once he ventured too far into the swamp and fell

into a bog hole above his knees. We screamed in dismay: 'Pull your pants up! Don't get mud on them!' We hauled him out of the smelly quagmire. Then spent two ghastly hours out of sight behind the barn . . . spitting and wiping him clean with our hankies. Dirty hankies could be surreptitiously washed under the tank-stand. But if John had arrived home covered in mud (which reflected the dangers of the swamp), we'd probably all have been fined a penny . . . and forbidden one of our favourite playgrounds.

Childhood had its problems. Also its chances for a quick profit if one got the upper hand. This of course was extremely rare. I remember one momentous day when Roderick fell off the landing sans harness. My mother and Aunty Amy were dressed and neither was a strong swimmer. I was the only one who could swim. 'Quick! Quick! Barbara, jump in and save him', called Aunty Amy.

I remember to this day realising the terrible power I had in my hands. At six! I'd lost all my 'good marks' for the week, so it must have been Friday. I was penniless, with no hope of buying sweets on Saturday when we rowed to Dora Creek. Not even a Larwood's marshmallow boot, which cost a farthing.

'No!' I said. 'I won't do it!' Roderick, who was my favourite, was screaming blue murder, but I could see he was nearly on the mud.

'Save him! Save him!' yelled my Aunt.

I stood firm.

'I'll do it for twelve marks! Threepence! I'll do it for threepence!' An utterly impossible fortune. It was a gamble. Would they think Roderick was worth all that? Of course I'd have done it for nothing, but it *was* worth a try.

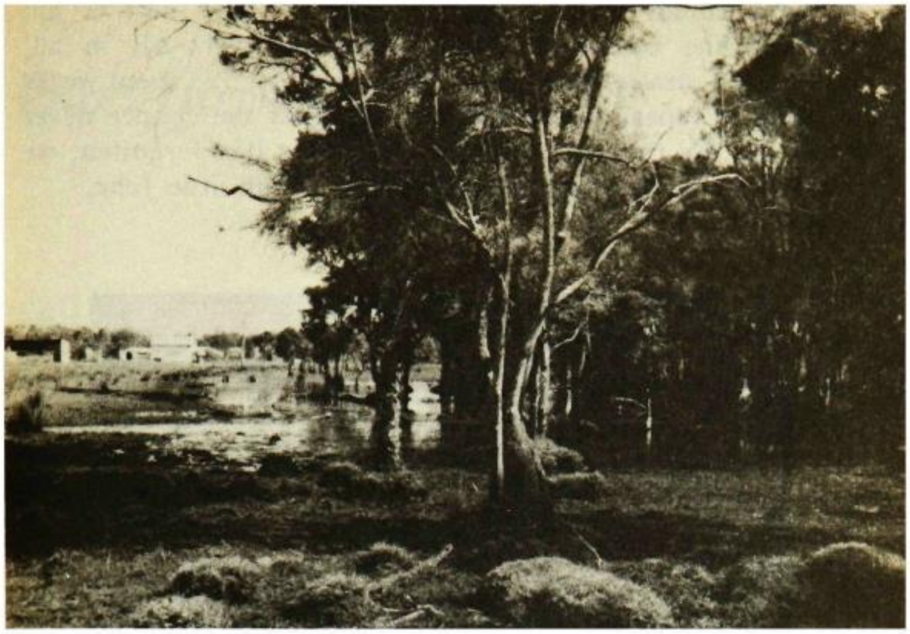
'Yes! Yes! Twelve marks! Threepence . . . just jump in and save him!'

'I want the money straight away!' From past experience, I knew well I could easily lose the twelve marks in twelve hours, without any help from my friends.

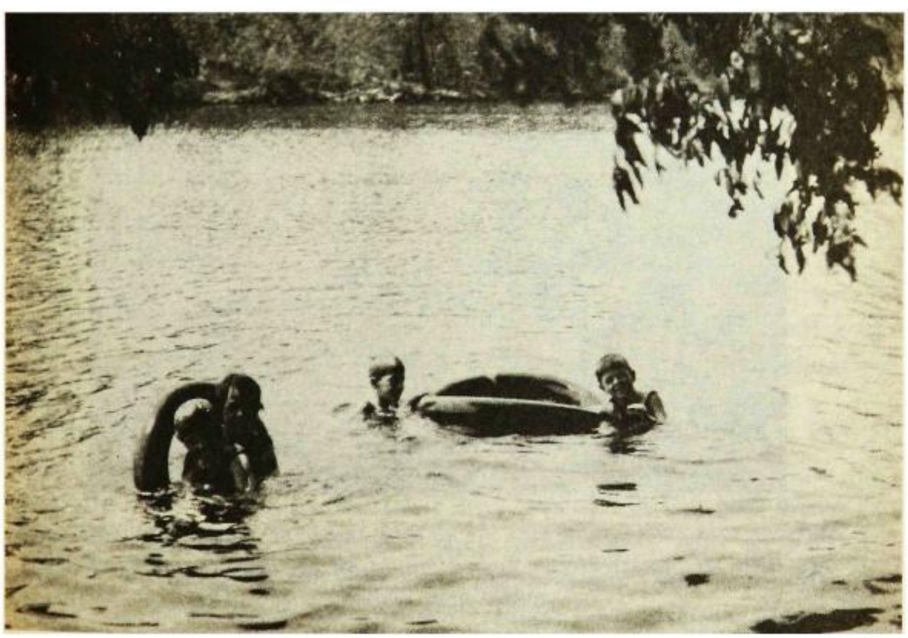
'Threepence when you get him on the landing! Yes! Quick, quick! Jump!' yelled my Aunty Amy.

The deal was done. So I jumped.

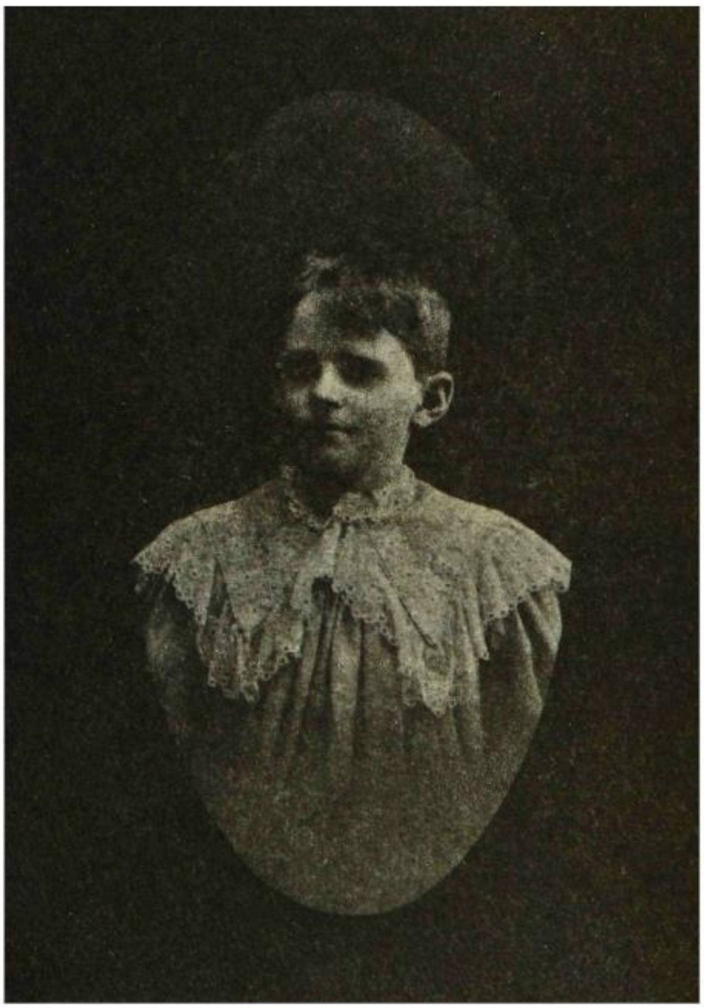
And next day we all shared the enormous bag of lollies that threepence bought. Eight bulls-eyes, four Larwood's boots, four all-day suckers, four Minties and four big marbles that



The swamp was our favourite playground. The smelly quagmire hasn't changed in fifty years—and my father's barn still stands unrusted, untarnished by time.



changed colour as you sucked them ... and best of all, changed the colour of your tongue as well. All in all, Roderick's disaster had been a great success. We spent weeks plotting to repeat the drama but somehow the chance never came up. By the time we felt the parents had forgotten, we discovered we could all swim perfectly. Even little John.



Everyone said young John was the spitting image of Aunty Max when she was little. If brother Hector hadn't lopped off her curls in 1905, no one would have realised.

Our Afternoon Rests

My mother and Aunty Amy needed respite from the clamour of children, and always had two hours' rest every afternoon. To facilitate this, each child was bedded down on a separate veranda for a sleep after lunch. Jean and I were allowed a book to read, but 'no noise, mind' was the daily edict. We would all dutifully allow ourselves to be tucked into bed. Jean and I had verandas adjoining the bedroom where our mothers lay on the double bed. We could hear their murmured talk, the creak of bed-springs . . . and finally their regular sleepy breathing.

Then quietly we would creep out of bed, crawl to the edge of our respective veranda and drop into the soft grass. The tall buffalo grass fringed the mysterious shady area beneath the house. It was the private domain of Jack, the dog. He'd just open one eye and watch us, as we crawled towards Roderick's veranda. Two taps on the floor-boards overhead, a slight shuffly sound and he'd appear in the grass, haloed in the afternoon sunlight. We would then plot the afternoon's mischief. It was no good tapping for John, because he had always dropped off to sleep. The one time we *did* take him, he was horribly cranky at tea-time and nearly told on us.

Such mischief! We only had an hour and a half. We had to stay close to the house, so we could get back to our beds in time. We hadn't discovered sex. So usually we crawled down to the landing and tickled the eels . . . or counted the toady fish . . . or caught baby jellyfish in our hands . . . or made up ghost stories. But remember: absolute quiet! No laughter!

Have you ever tickled an eel? They love it. First between the eyes and along their head. Then when they are used to that, you slip your finger under their jaw and tickle the soft white skin of their neck. Gradually they would slide out of their watery den between the logs, and let us tickle their stomachs.

We never realised the danger. They had vicious needle-

sharp teeth! At other times we'd feed them with old meat scraps or fish heads. They snapped with the speed of lightening. They'd attack the fish heads from inside. Then go streaking through the water, wearing the big bream-heads like white circus masks.

I often wonder how they knew our small pink fingers were not for eating?



The eels lived under the wharf. (The dogs: Don who took a fox-bait; and Jack, who was lost in the 'last flood'.)

Milking Time

Our summer days started when the sun came up and the grass was heavy with dew. We would hear my father filling the big black iron kettle, and plumping it on the fuel stove. The grate would rattle as he cleaned out yesterday's ashes. Then came the sound of newspaper being torn and crushed, and the chips being put in the fire box.

By the time the match was struck, we'd be pulling off our pyjamas and struggling into shorts and shirts. In the rush one of us would usually have a back-to-front problem with pants. Especially little John, who moved through life in a mad series of high-speed impulses. He was always being hassled to 'Look first! Use your eyes before you do *anything*!'

He was still at the button-on-pant stage, critical and slightly hazardous at potty-time. All his shirts had four big pearl buttons sewn round the waist. They were supposed to keep his shirt from hanging out, but never did. He was one of those happy, raggle-tail boys, whose sou'wester sun-hat was always on sideways or back-to-front. Almost every morning he rushed into his shirt inside-out. I can still see the wiry, squirming little bare-bottomed figure yelling: 'By Job, deese buttons is cold! By Job! Jean help *me-e-e*!'

When we got to the kitchen, my father would be boiling the kettle. Jean and I would bring in the two galvanized iron milk-buckets to be sterilised. The hot water would remain in one, so my father could wash the udders and teats before milking. Before we left he'd take down a bottle of olive oil and massage a little into his hands. 'Cows are just like anyone else', he'd say. 'They like soft hands.'

That done, he'd give us each our own big enamel mug and we'd set off. The day was well and nicely started! We'd call 'Good morning, did you sleep well?' to Aunty Amy and my mother. They never stirred until we'd clattered out of the



The upside-down sliprail kids: Roderick, John, Jean and Bab.

house. Breakfast would be set and waiting when we returned.

But now was milking time. The best time of the day. Everything was so fresh and dewy. Our small bare feet would be wet in minutes. The grass seeds stuck to our legs, and we'd see who could get the best set of 'speckle boots' by the time we arrived at the dairy.

Our job was to round up the three cows and the calf. They had to be chased through the slip-rails into the milking yard. The calf was weaned early and had to be taught to drink from the bucket. A sensual, delicious experience! The milk was warm and frothy in the bucket. It felt beautiful when you dipped your hand in it. The smell was sweet and grassy. With a milky hand, dripping with froth, you touched the calf's nose and let him lick off the milk. His tongue was rough as sandpaper, dominatingly firm. Hungry. Then gradually you coaxed his nervous nose closer to the bucket, and let him lick your fingers as you submerged them into the froth. Fingers being sucked and caressed by a calf's tongue. Yummy! It was a delicious tickle, a sensational sensation! We squabbled for the chance to do it. Everyone had to have a go or there would be tears. The dog waited with great eagerness for the calf to finish.

He licked his share of the milk off its face. Left it absolutely clean and spotless.

In the cow bales, my father put feed in the boxes and drove the cows into their stalls. Once their heads were in the feed-box, he'd slip the wooden post into place and fix the chain so they were trapped by the neck. The milking stool was a comfortable old grey stump, which got deftly kicked into place. He'd sit down with the bucket of warm water to wash the udders and teats. Then pat them dry with the clean towel slung round his neck. The water bucket put safely aside, he'd hitch the stool closer and balance the milk-bucket between his knees. Putting his forehead against the cow's belly, he'd murmur loving encouragement: 'Come on Bessie, me girl, come on.'

The first squirt of creamy milk went over his hands to lubricate the teats. Then would start the slurp-slurp, slurp-slurp as jets of milk filled the bucket. The sound was tinny and metalic at first, until the bottom was covered. Then followed the rich, thick slurp-slurp as the jets of milk squirted through the froth.

It was at this stage, when things were going nicely and the cows were calm, that we'd line up with our mugs. One at a time, we'd crouch down and slip our mug into the rim of the bucket. Milk straight from the cow . . . slurp-slurp, slurp-slurp, right into the mug till the froth slowly mounted and reached the chipped blue rim. We'd wait with warm, brimming mugs held carefully, until the ritual was done four times.

The next ritual took skill and practice. Walking one after the other to the slip-rails, we'd swing upside-down, still holding the mugs of milk. With feet braced against the top rail, we would then drink our milk . . . upwards. First to finish, won! Laughing, we'd swing down and examine the marvellous frothy moustaches that adorned our faces.

Next ritual was rolling time. The cow bales and dairy were built on a ridge with a steep sloping bank, knee-deep in lush clover and kikuyu grass. Still damp and glistening with dew, more often than not, it hid warm squashy cowpats. We'd hurl ourselves over the slope, and roll down in joyful, screaming abandon. The one who hit a cowpat . . . lost! And undoubtedly lost a good mark, or *two* if our mothers were tense and cranky. But the fun was well worth it.

The delicious joy of early morning cowpats was not to be

missed. We'd hunt them out. They squelched through the toes in extravagant brown patterns, and felt extremely satisfying to small bare feet. There was no such joy later in the day, when the sun had baked a firm hard crust. But even then they had a certain voyeur enchantment. We'd flip them over, crouch around and carefully watch and discuss the worms and beetles and maggots that squirmed beneath. There was entertainment in everything. Nothing was lost.

Milking-time in the evening had another excitement. That was egg collecting time. There were four nests made of wooden fruit cases, lined with straw. We each owned a nest. And of course the one with the most eggs won. We'd write our name in wobbly capitals on our biggest egg. These treasures were laid carefully on top of the clutch, and carried home by my father in the empty hot-water bucket.

For tea, if we were quiet and played with our colouring-in books *nicely*, we would be allowed to eat our very own egg ... boiled in a black billy on the shiny black fuel stove, which smelt strongly of Blackett.

On the kitchen table, where we had our tea by lamplight, was a plate piled high with neat quarter-slices of fresh-baked brown bread. It was spread thickly with home-made butter. After the eggs were eaten, they were always turned upside down in the egg-cups to trick the grown-ups. Licking our egg-spoons clean, we'd scoop into the basin of clotted cream and dollop it onto the bread. Then a spoonful of golden syrup (straight from the red tin) was dribbled artistically in swirls and loop-the-loops over the cream. With mouse-like nibbles, we'd eat the small squares of bread into animal shapes. 'Look, mine's a heffelump!' 'I've made a bird!' and so it went on, till we were finally 'excused' from the table, and given an apple to eat to clean our teeth.

Those golden days of summer . . . all ending with a two-by-two splashy bath, a good rub down, and good-night kisses from the grown-ups. The ruffle of hair and a cool hand checking our foreheads. That was Aunty Amy. 'Roderick feels a bit hot. He may have a temperature. Malcolm, you'd better check him in the morning before he goes out.'

We children all slept outside on the veranda, where the cool evening breeze brought little noises of the night, and billowed

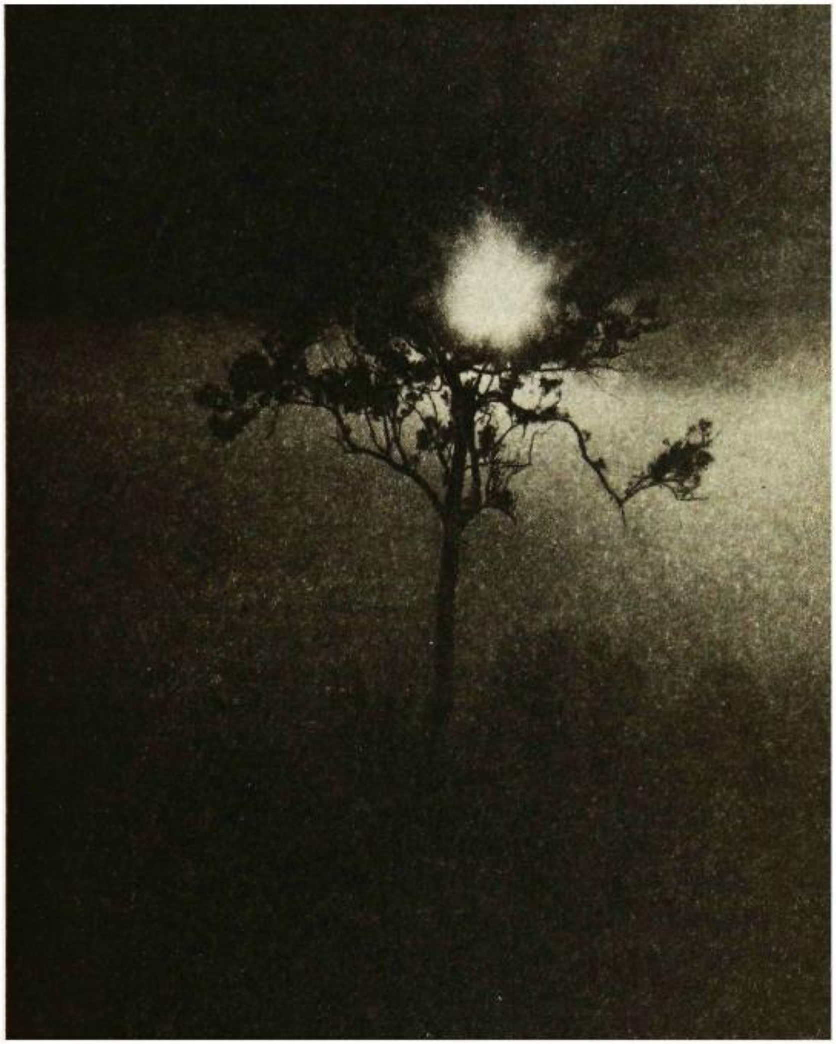
our mosquito-net tents. How I remember the dry stuffy smell under the cotton net, and the gentle buzzing of mosquitoes outside.

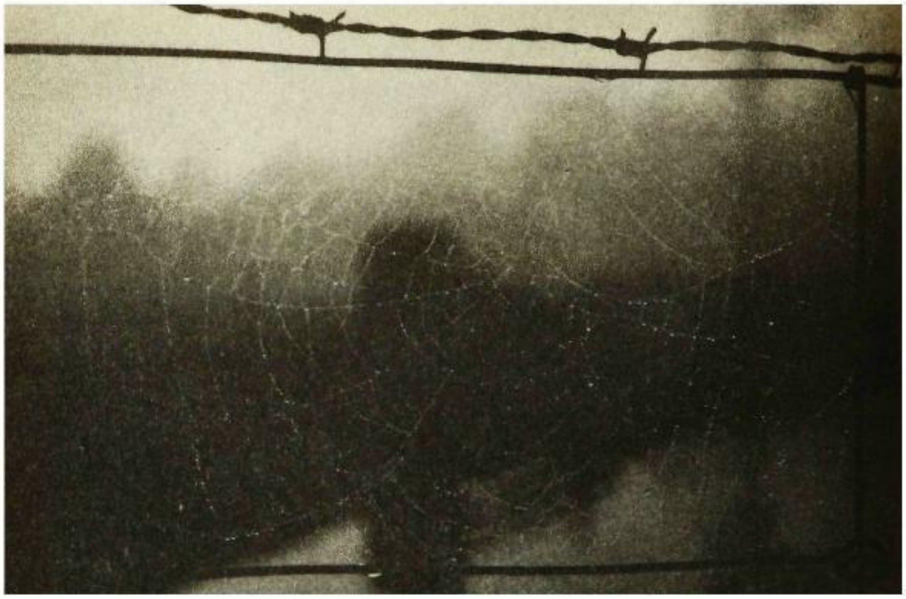
The last sight every night, framed in the dark window sash, was silhouettes of the grown-ups washing-up. They were back-lit with the soft golden light of hurricane lamps.

The last sound was the pleasant reassuring thud, as Jack the dog flopped down beside our beds to guard us as we slept.

Winter Morning

The air is still,
the sky pale
translucent blue.
Diamonds glitter
in the grass
against long shadows
from the early sun...
pale, clear,
not warming yet.
My breath
a puff of mist,
the intake
clear and frosty.
My fingers, nose
and ears
tingle in the cold.
The frosty grass
crackles
as I walk.
My wellingtons
all shiny wet,
speckled with seed.
Suddenly
the very air
echoes
with the
morning melody
of magpie song.
The horse, the cows
are rimmed
with golden sunlight.





Little misty haloes
cloud their muzzles,
shiny moist.
Dark cowpats
steam
on flattened grass.
From the rusted
barbed-wire fence
trembling cobwebs
sparkle,
strung with dew-drops,
like tiny crystal beads.
Long fingers
of deep shadow,
reach back
straight and clear
to the foot
of each
towering eucalypt.
A kookaburra
laughs with joy
at the dawn
of this new day.

The Fire

We woke to a hot dry blustery day. Itchy to the soul. At dawn, the air was quivering with yesterday's heat. By 7.30 the bush was whispering. The westerly was coming early. At breakfast, on the veranda, we children were fractious. The heat bred an abrasive tension.

Little John had lost Ebenezer, his security doll, made of a skein of black wool.

'You'se hid it! I *know*! You'se hid it!' he screamed.

Roderick, aged six, had definitely got-out-of-bed-on-the-wrong-wide.

'I didn't! I didn't! It's right against the wall', he snarled, lashing out with his foot under the table.

'Roderick kicked me!' said Jean pompously. Loud enough for a parent to hear.

'I don't want my breakfast!' I said shoving the plate away.

'You've all lost one mark. . .' said Aunty Amy from the kitchen door. 'May! Mark that on the slate. *All* down one mark! Now, leave the table and go outside!'

We slouched off, giving each other filthy looks, and vicious elbow-jabs. It was a bad day. Very rare. Definitely unusual. But assuredly bad! We felt it in the air we breathed.

As the sun got higher, the air got drier. Almost electric. We escaped each other's cranky company by climbing our separate trees. Oneself and nature was even too much. Explosive. There was a feeling of waiting. It was in the wind. The tender leaves of the peach tree, shading me, soon looked limp and frizzled at the edges. It was a strange day. Unreal to our few years of experience.

Suddenly the wind carried a whiff of smoke. That was the moment we called to each other. United! A point of contact. Our tension evaporated.

'What is it? Something's burning!'

Instantly the two mothers appeared on the veranda, sniffing the air.

'*That's* a bush-fire!' announced Aunty Amy.

'Where's Malcolm?' said my mother. 'And *where* are the children?'

She rang the cow-bell and we all came running.

From the veranda, we watched a thin wisp of smoke rise from the bush beyond Tilse's hill. My father came up from the orchard. He too had heard the cow-bell.

'With this wind, that fire will get away! And it's heading towards us', was all he said. He picked up a couple of sacks and doused them under the tank. 'Go down and get Arnold', he said quietly to Jean and me. 'Tell him I'll be over by the barn . . . then come *straight* home.'

We raced barefoot through the orchard, Jean well in front. She was the champion sprinter of the McDonald Clan. By the time she'd delivered the message, I was still negotiating the stile. So we puffed home in the heat. The black earth of the orchard was almost too hot to bear.

Buckets, baths, saucepans, kerosene-tins . . . everything was being filled with water from the creek. The smoke was billowing in clouds now. Hazing through the orchards . . . dimming our view of the cow-bales and barn. The gates were open, and the live-stock drifted through the paddocks towards the house. Dick first, then the cows and calf, followed by a medley of chooks. Overhead the air was flecked with birds, fleeing eastwards from the bush. The high grass of the paddocks rustled and moved with small marsupials and wild mice. All escaping towards the creek. Water. Safety.

From the height of the veranda, we watched the great dark cloud of smoke. It had spread from a single pillar, to a front of one mile . . . two miles. Then we heard the sound, the distant crackle . . . and seconds later we saw the red glow beneath the smoke. Next the flames, leaping and licking into the under-belly of the grey clouds.

The air was hotter . . . the wind stronger. The first choking quality of the smoke reached through our noses into our lungs. It wasn't fear yet. It was exhilarating. It stirred the blood. The sight . . . the distant crackling roar . . . the smell of danger.

Black cinders filled the air. They singed little pock-marks in the sheets on the line. Aunty Amy put a wet towel over her

head, and ran to rescue them. Clasping the armful of washing, she came up the steps.

'It's time to send the children down to the creek, May. Clothes on. Hats on . . . and jump in kids. Keep wet. If we need you, make sure you're sopping wet before you come. Remember! Dripping wet! And Jean . . . you look after John.'

As we went, my mother and Aunty Army started sloshing buckets of water over the timber part of the house walls. We watched from the wharf. Watching . . . then honey-potting into the coolness with great splashes . . clambering out to watch again. Noses dripping.

Occasionally, a figure in slapping skirt, would dart from the house through the thick smoky air. Purposefully, to stamp out little wisps of smoke that started in the grass round the house. Once we saw a trickle of smoke start in the gutter. Jean sent Roderick to warn the mothers. He was the best climber. Soon we saw his wiry little figure jerking up the tank stand, monkey-climbing the silver rings of the tank and finally attaining the gutter. He scampered round and stifled the smoke with more leaves. Then there was a lot of fluttering activity as he scooped and tossed the leaves out of the gutter. Mothers watched as he walked out on to the top of the tank, looked down and decided it would be easier to jump. They were there to catch him, hug him, and send him back to the safety of the creek.

We could hear the roar of the flames getting louder . . . the gigantic crash of trees falling. Suddenly the smoke thickened . . . drifting down the bank . . . over the water in choking fumes. Our excitement was intense . . . bubbling . . . it overflowed and joined us into one tight unit of life. Where, in the pre-fire tension, we hated . . . now within the actual fear, we loved and cared. It was a primitive animal instinct that flowed around . . . between us. The vital excitement of survival.

In the creek we played. Our bodies cool, our faces hot. We dived, and within seconds of surfacing, our eyes burned with smoke, our lips and nostrils dried. We duck-dived and played beneath the surface . . . forgetting. The dogs came and joined us. Sitting disconsolately on the wharf at first . . . panting. Then they jumped in with us and swam around. Retreating so they could keep their feet on the mud. They whined and whimpered.

The sun had long since disappeared beyond the smoke. Blood-red at first. Then a pink blur beyond the all-pervading grey. Smoke drifted and hung in heavy swirls . . . low against the grass . . . touching its reflection in the water.

Sometime during the afternoon, my mother brought us down a pile of tomato sandwiches and a basket of apples. But we were too excited to feel hungry. I remember the taste of a tomato sandwich, moist and soggy from the salt water that dripped down my cheeks.

The smell of smoke gave us electric energy. It stimulated the very core of our being. Like a drug! Once experienced . . . never to be forgotten.

A thousand years later, in 1980, I watched the flames engulf the paddocks around our farm house at Conondale, Queensland. I fought them, like my father, with wet sacks. And saw the white smoke drift . . . exhausted . . . over the black-charred tufts of grass. They'd been brilliant green one minute . . . leaping scarlet . . . then black. Black, with a fine white ash that crumbled as the after-breeze went by.

As children, we heard the calls for help: 'Bring water! Quick! Bring water!' Empty buckets were thrown down to us and we filled them from the creek. By now the flames were a fluttering red wall on the far side of the swamp. The solid trunks of mahogany, black against scarlet and gold, their heads flaring in great gaseous swirls of fire. Leaping! Dancing against the smoke.

Then like an explosion, the whole swamp burst into flames. Crisp and dry by now, the bullrushes burnt like paper. A long shimmering wall of instant fire . . . blue, yellow at its base . . . orange, red at the flickering top. Beyond a huge tree crashed, and sent up a gigantic column of scarlet cinders. The whole bush was aflame. And below it, the swamp sheeted forward in a fantastic surge.

The roar and crackle of the flames sounded infinitely closer. Different! More intimate. Then with a suddenness, the flames of the bullrushes hit the swamp-water. There was a mighty sizzle . . . a frantic hiss, like a dying breath . . . all at once on a one mile front!

White steam billowed and shrouded the smoke. It rose as the whole swamp boiled on impact. Suddenly the danger was over. All that remained was the bush, black and writhing against the

last of the tree flames. Pillars of glowing embers, that changed colour with the wind . . . tottered and crashed amid great spurts of fiery ash.

As night fell, the air was alight with cinders . . . floating . . . swirling like fireflies. Like scarlet stars that died before they reached the earth. We ran from the creek and tried to catch them . . . to leap and touch them with our fingertips.

But we were too small. Little creatures of the earth. The mighty God of Fire had gone . . . had touched our souls forever with his glory . . . and teased us deliciously in his dying hour.

The moon, blood-red . . . the air heavy with smoke and sprinkled with glimmering cinders . . . the shuddering crash of a distant tree . . . pure magic to lull us to sleep that marvellous night.

Bogong Moths

In November 1930, when Phar Lap won the Melbourne Cup, we slept that night on our veranda dormitory, under limp tents of mosquito netting. The full moon rose and set and the fluttering of giant Bogong moths filled the air. They bumped against the nets, heavily . . . and flopped thumpily on the floor.

As the first pale glow of dawn etched the trees into silhouette, the moths sought dim, shadowy refuge for the day. They folded their dark, velvety wings against their plump bodies. Neatly. And with strong legs, clambered into corners and crevices. Round door jambs. Under gutters. Into skirting-boards. Many sought shelter in our beds.

The first morning we found it frightening to wake with big, fat, squashy moths neatly tucked in the folds of our nets . . . under our pillows and our hankies . . . between our sheets . . . and even down our pyjamas. They were big. It was like an invasion of bats!

We'd never seen Bogong moths before. They belong down south in Victoria. And as far as I can remember, the plague only lasted that one summer . . . for one week.

After the first melee of screams and excitement, we realised the moths offered new entertainment. We could count them. Whoever had the most in bed . . . won! Live moths got a better score than squashed ones. Roderick who was a 'still' sleeper always got a better score than John, who wriggled and squirmed, even when asleep.

When the morning count was over, they could be collected in shoe-boxes. But best of all, we found they could swim! Little John took his box down to the wharf to do a re-count. Shortly there were screams of anguish. Of course! What else? He fumbled and dropped the whole box, moths and all, into the water. We got sticks and tried to fish out the cardboard Noah's Ark. The box tipped. The moths were launched.

Imagine our delight, when the moths, wings neatly folded behind them, swam to shore. Zooming like little boats, so fast they left a clean vee of ripples behind them. In fact the water didn't seem to worry them at all. The deep velvet of their thick black-grey wings was like duck feathers. Impervious to water. What better sport than moth racing?

Gently, we each took our single competitor, held carefully in cupped hands, to the far end of the boat. Jean, being the eldest, was starter and referee.

'No rocking the boat ... before or during a race! No splashing to ruin your opponent's chances! And no giving your moth a help by throwing him in!'

Everything was fair and above board.

With our shoe-box stables of racing moths, we cheered on about twenty races. Then unfortunately the eels, lazing between the wharf logs, realised something was happening up-top. Four succulent juicy dishes were passing over their heads every minute! Too much to resist! Swirl! Splash! Snap! Sink! The race was over midfield.

The four Bogong owners held a hasty discussion, hunched over our precious shoe-boxes.

'What about the baby-bath?'

'It's round! The wrong shape.'

'Anyway it's too small.'

'Ah ... what about the big-bath?'

'... but do you think *they'd* let us?'

'No-o-o!'

'They *never* let us play in the bathroom.'

'Well, we *could* ask...'

'Maybe they've *never* seen a moth swim?'

'Perhaps they'd be *interested*...'

'I dunno. My mother's not very keen on Bogongs...'

'Yes, she *screams* every morning!'

'*Uncle Malcolm* would be interested. I *bet*!'

So we went off, boxes tucked under our arms, to find my father.

'Bogong Moths? Swim? I don't believe it!'

'They do! They do!' we shouted.

So we retired to the bathroom, to demonstrate.

'Incredible!' said my father. 'They're *very* strong swimmers.'

Soon the mothers came to investigate the bedlam.

'Well, I *suppose* they can stay . . .'

'As long as there's *no fighting*', said Aunty Amy, waving her crooked fore-finger. 'Remember *no fighting*! No *splashing*! And *no yelling*! Definitely no *cheering*!'

'Amy! Tell them they could lose marks!' called my mother. 'And for heavens sake, don't let them squash any of the things in the bath!'

So during the week of the Bogongs, we led a very sporting life in the gloomy dark of the bathroom. Our knees permanently waffled with the imprint of the duck-boards. Our wet fingers wizened like raisins. Our eyes dazzled and dazed when we were dragged out into the sunlight for lunch. All in all, that was a very good week!

The Stringy-Bark Hut

Up behind our farm, past the cow bales and the swamp, was the bush. A narrow cart track meandered through the wattles and blood gums round the south end of the swamp. It finally broke through the trees into a clearing. The cabin was made from thick timber slabs, cut straight from the bush. It was old then, grey and weathered. The walls were of split tree trunks laid horizontally. A roof of bark shaded the door and sagged over the porch. Two old cane chairs leant together in the porch shade. This was where the Shawnessys lived.

They moved there in the Depression, from Campbelltown outside Sydney. And to my utter delight there were two children, Milly and Joe, about my own age. Joe was nine, wiry, brown and freckled with an uncut mop of curly hair. He was treated with great respect by the family, because he had recently saved his sister's life.

'If the lad hadn't such presence of mind, she'd be dead', they said.

It was hard to tell if Milly had been a pretty or a plain child before the accident. She'd been kicked in the face by a horse and one side of her little face bore the horrible imprint. Her forehead, her eye, her cheek caved in. It was joined to the perfect side with an appalling semi-circle of red scar and stitch marks. Mrs Shawnessy was not a reticent woman. The first time I met Milly, she stood in the frame of her mother's heavy washerwoman's arm:

'You know her brains were all hanging out', said Mrs Shawnessy conversationally.

'Young Joe carried her over to the tank and washed away the mud. Then he carried her all the way to the doctor in Campbelltown. Of course that was last year. He was only eight.

The husband and I had gone to Parramatta that day. He's a good lad, our Joe.'

I had nightmares that week. The dreadful picture of Milly's brains and the mud being washed away under the tank stand haunted me until I met the children again. They came over to play a week later.

I remember that first ghastly time, standing trying to talk to each other. Normally I was a chatterbox, never lost for words. But they were shy children and I was hypnotised by Milly's face. Shattered into silence by her staring, blind blue eye.

My mother must have come to the rescue with Anzac biscuits and milk. She probably broke the awful gulf by dragging out my wicker clothes-basket of toys and books. For the first time I suddenly saw Milly as a *real* little girl. She was mothering one of my dolls, changing its frock and bonnet. From then on I don't think I was really conscious of her scars. She was a great playmate . . . loved dolls, geography, picture books and 'colouring-in'. We played being 'visiting mothers' and she was Mrs Burnett and I was Mrs Burdekin — it was soon after we'd discovered a map with the rivers of Queensland. We suggested to Joe that he could be Mr Mackenzie, but he preferred to climb trees.

They lived too far away to visit often, but Joe used to pick up milk from my father every morning. We used to write letters to each other and soon devised the most exciting secret mail boxes: Bourneville Cocoa tins hidden in the ground. Mine was scooped in a hollow under the wall of the dairy. Milly's was under a rock beneath the barn near the shell-grit dish. Joe's was at the corner of the cow bales. Each afternoon I'd go over with my father to help round up the cows. While he was milking, I'd leave notes or some small treasure in their tins and collect my mail. Theirs came on the 6.30 am delivery. There was extra magic to know that one's mail had been waiting secretly in the tin, underground, for twelve hours.

Delicious intrigue! What surprises we'd find! A piece of snake-skin . . . knuckle-bones to play 'jacks' (obviously fresh from an Irish stew) . . . a glass marble . . . a matchbox covered with tiny shells (from the chooks' shell-grit dish and still smelling strongly of 'Secotine') . . . an Ebenezer doll made of black wool with milk-jug bead eyes . . . a doll's bonnet

painstakingly knitted by grubby fingers . . . a hard-boiled egg with painted face. Or perhaps a little Peck's Paste jar filled with lemon cheese . . . a sprig of brown sweet-smelling boronia . . . a 'tractor' concocted from a Coates wooden cotton reel, a rubber band and a stick . . . a set of dancing paper dolls, carefully coloured-in, each with a different face and frock. Sometimes there was even a Mintie or a bull's eye . . . a much wilted clover chain . . . or a pipe-cleaner man with an acorn head. We even played noughts and crosses by mail!

The secretiveness of our mail game was so precious that we actually signed a pact in blood never, ever, to reveal what was going through the mail . . . on pain of death! 'Cross your heart and hope to die!' So each of us had dual characters. It was like having four friends instead of two, for me.

Even when we walked four miles to school together, we stopped at the dairy, barn and cow bales to post our mail in the morning. In the afternoon, it made us want to rush home. No day-to-day squabbles were allowed to be mentioned in our mail game, and we never opened our letters and surprises in sight of each other.

It was via my cocoa tin that I discovered the news that Milly had the measles. When no more mail arrived from Joe, it was pretty obvious he had them too. So I told my mother.

She decided that it was probably wise for me to get the measles over and done with, while I was only eight.

'They're always worse when you're grown-up', she said.

So we went to pay the Shawnessys a 'sick call'. I was allowed to sit on the bed with Milly and Joe, while my mother sat outside with Mrs Shawnessy.

I hadn't been inside the cabin before and it came as a surprise. The four walls were lined with newspaper to keep out the draughts. It was pasted over the rough slabs like wallpaper, and was yellowed with age and smoke from the wood stove. The corners were stained darker, where the rain had soaked down. The floor was bare earth, hard packed and slightly dusty. There was a potato sack for a rug by the bed.

There were no windows, just a front door and a back door opposite. In fact it was just one room. On the left side of the front door was a big black iron bed that nearly filled the area.

This was where mother, father and the now measley children slept, under a torn grey blanket. Their pale little spotty faces were framed with the grey ticking of the pillows.

On the right of the door was a rickety table and four chairs, a cupboard and a rusty cast-iron stove. A kerosene tin of water boiled and steamed on the stove. The chimney was made of corrugated iron. Outside the back door was a big tin dish set on logs by the tank stand. This doubled as kitchen sink and bath.

I thought it was all rather like a cubby-house and very romantic. But my mother decided that ten minutes would be plenty of time for me to catch the measles. So we went off home, my little city-bred mother saying under her breath. 'Oh dear! I had no idea! I had no idea!'

That night after I was tucked in bed and watching my hands for the spots to appear, I heard my mother and father having a long mumbling talk round the kitchen table.

The next day the ottoman was opened, the air suddenly reeking of moth-balls. My mother pulled out a blanket, sheets, pillowcases and a tablecloth. Then she ransacked my wardrobe for 'things *you'd* like to give Milly'. It was all very dramatic and exciting. We packed everything in a suitcase, picked some roses, selected some adventure books for Joe and went off to visit the Shawnessys again. This time to collect a better dose of measles!

I remember distinctly that Milly and Joe were out and about in five days. I was laid up with spots, temperature of 106^0 and sore eyes for two and a half weeks. But I just happen to be very susceptible to spots and have been laid low with various types of measles four times in my adult life. But the first time was definitely the most memorable. When the spots came I was far too sick to enjoy them!

A murderer, who buried his victim in the bush with just her hands showing, was hanged that week in Sydney. I must have seen the gruesome photographs in the *Sunday Sun* and heard the news on the wireless. Everyone seemed very aware of the day and hour of the hanging. It cast a dark shadow of horror on us. Tossing in my sick bed, delirious with fever, I suffered the most terrible nightmares. Murder and hangings and death! They would have done credit to the best of Boris Karloff.

Of course I'd never been inside a picture theatre, but talkies

were all the rage in 1931. Back in 1928, Sydneysiders lined up for blocks to see talkies like *The Jazz Singer, The Family Picnic* and *The Red Dance.* The plushy old Regent in George Street and the Lyceum, with its Persian glamour, did a roaring trade. Typically, 'Grannie' Herald slammed the new talkies: 'Vastly inferior to live theatre. Just an expensive make-shift fad that will be limited to dialogue, songs and specialities.'

So only seventy-nine miles south of the stringy-bark hut, the chic world of flappers with 'IT' and their Akubra-hatted johnnies, were witness to the greatest breakthrough in entertainment ever.

But whatever happened to Milly Shawnessy? Happily she fell in love and married by the time she was twenty.

Livingstone's Corner

From our house, Dora Creek flowed north about two miles to Livingstone's Corner, then eastwards out to Lake Macquarie and the sea. Dora Creek township was on the eastern reach, halfway to the Lake.

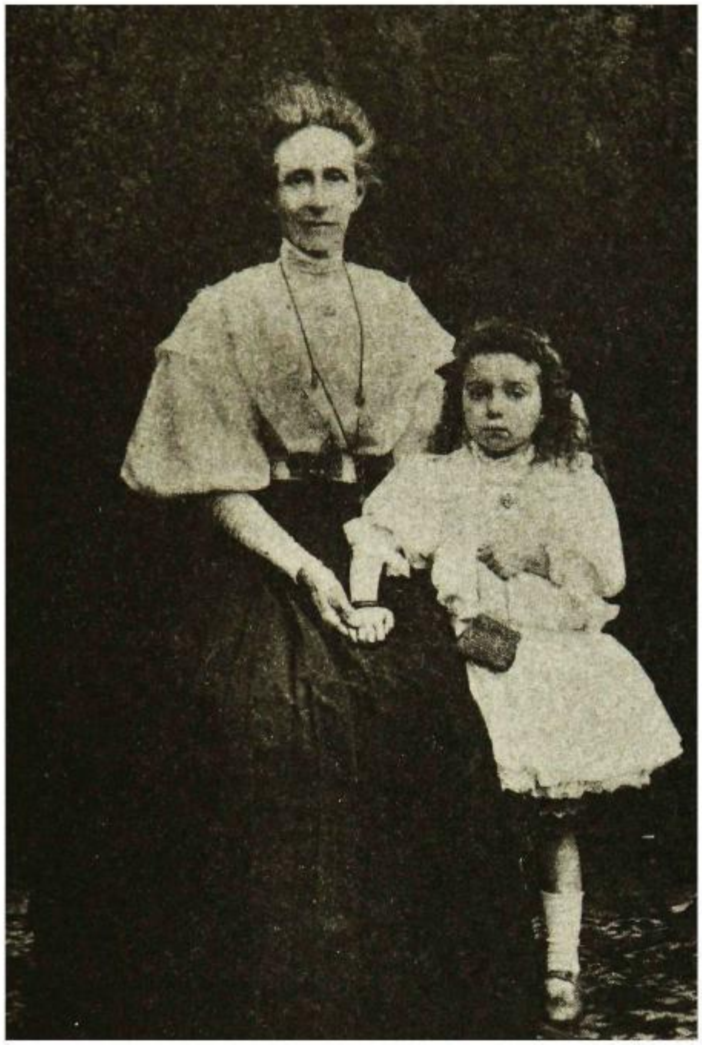
The Livingstone sisters were original Victorian vintage, and nothing in their attitudes, lifestyle or clothes had changed since about 1890. It was understood that they were related to Dr-Livingstone-I-Presume.

In the inbred fishing township of Dora Creek circa 1929, the Misses Livingstone brought a touch of old-world elan and gentility to Mr Holme's grocer's shop at 11 am and Mr Harpur's Post Office at 3.30 pm daily. Apparently they had only four outfits left from their days of youthful glory. One for each season.

So each morning, at precisely the same time, the younger antique sister would walk the mile and a half into town for the groceries. And in the afternoon the elder sister would go, wearing the identical clothes, to post and pick up the mail from the Post Office.

The sisters were slim and straight. Their walk was lilting and they looked like ethereal creatures from a French impressionist canvas. The dresses had bustles and draped apron-front skirts. Their neat kid boots were buttoned up the side in scallops and the heels were waisted in the Louis fashion. The hats were flamboyantly large and always tied with a veil. You could watch the seasons come and go, the year return to its full cycle, just by noting what the Livingstone sisters wore.

Smelling slightly of moth-balls, on 1 September the spring outfit appeared. Dove grey taffeta! The jacket, braided with black silk, had a little flounce over the bustle. And at the neck and wrists peeped ruffles of the white lace blouse. The green hat was wide and shady, a huge concoction of straw and organza flowers, anchored with beetle bright hat pins.



The Livingstones were austerely beautiful, with aristocratic, fine-boned features.

Summer came on 1 December in a flurry of white silk. The skirt had a frill round the hem that looped up to the bustle. A frock for summer, not a suit. It had a high neckline, long leg-of-mutton sleeves with lace and pin-tucks on the bodice. Pin-tucks everywhere. Now the monstrous shady hat was white. Almost a meringue of organdie flowers. It was tied with a long georgette scarf of palest pink, that fluttered under Miss Livingstone's aged chin.

March 1 heralded autumn, even if the weather was still hot. The Misses Livingstone moved into the black-and-white suit. It was of finest wool in hound's-tooth checks with black silk lapels. The jacket was longer, with fold-back tails at the back to reveal the saucy bustle. The hat, suddenly more austere, was of shiny black straw. Still wide of brim, still tied with a floaty scarf. But now the scarf was black to herald the death of the year.

'Most beautifully tailored', my mother used to say. 'Probably made in Paris! Good clothes just *never* age, my dear. *Remember* that!'

June 1 unveiled the dramatic winter outfit. Black serge, just slightly greened with age. The tight-fitting jacket was now thigh length. There were no frivolous apron-folds on the skirt. Instead the deep hem was bordered with thick black silk braid, worked in intricate scrolls. The hat was small, perched forward on Miss Livingstone's neat grey head. The thick rolls of hair at the back, echoed the bustle's profile. A cobweb of black veiling caged her entire face, and made her speak even more primly than in other seasons.

The seasons ruled the lives of the Misses Livingstone. I remember squirming in the heat of a November morning, while she and my mother talked outside Mr Holme's grocery shop. My silk-and-wool singlet was hot and itchy. I squirmed and pleaded to take it off.

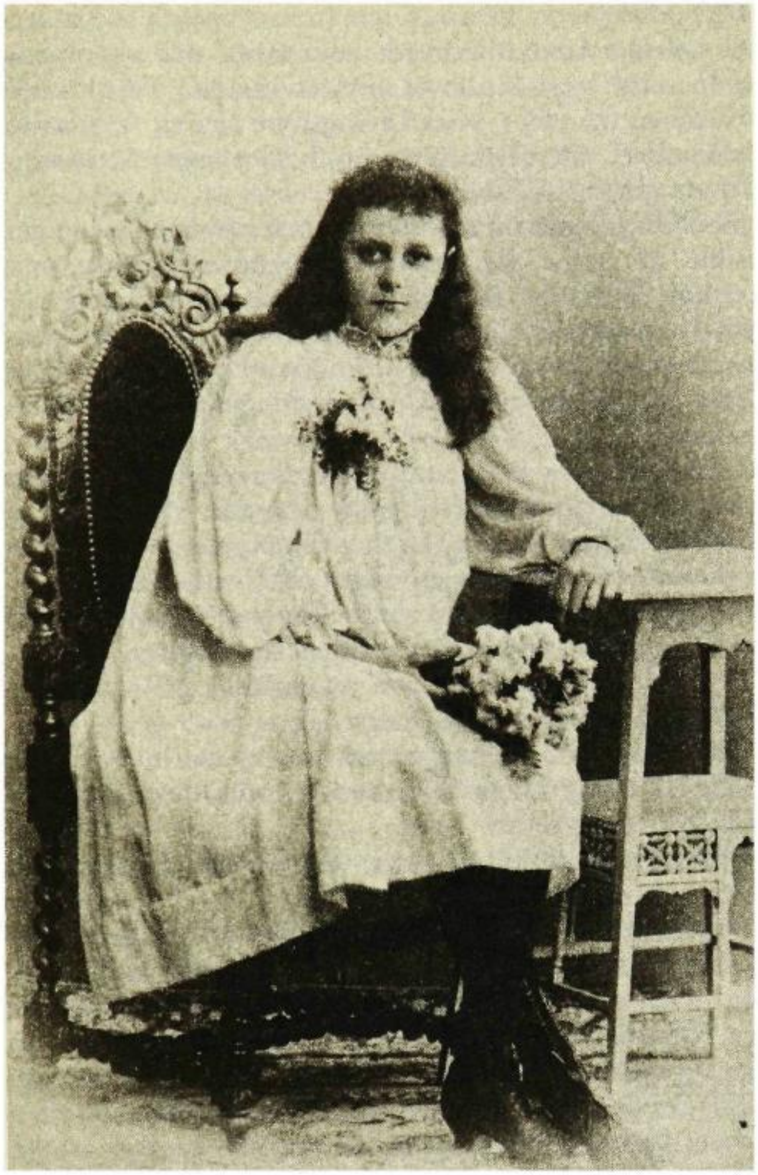
'But Spring weather is so *unpredictable*', said Miss Livingstone primly.

'You must never take her woollen singlet off until 1 December, my dear. Children are *so* susceptible!'

The sisters lived in an old two-storey timber house at Livingstone's Corner. It was iced with square wooden veranda posts, scroll-work, French doors and a Juliet balcony off the upstairs bedroom. It had once been crisply painted in grey and white, but now most of the paint had flaked off.

The garden was a wilderness of hydrangeas and ferns, daffodils, freesias, jonquils and forget-me-nots. It was tightly enclosed with a once white picket fence. Now it had a few teeth missing and the gate sagged open. The big trees of the bush crowded round three sides, and the river, eating at the muddy banks, now flowed twelve feet from their front gate.

When my cousin Alex was five, he walked past the gate



Victorian elegance for little girls: in 1894 Emily May (my mother) was just twelve, and chosen to be May Queen for the Maypole and Morris Dancing festival.

every afternoon on his way home from school. The Livingstone sisters always lured him inside with cakes, and he joined them for an adult-type sit-down afternoon tea. To this day he remembers the elder Miss Livingstone saying very seriously: 'Remember! When you grow up to be a man . . . never, *never* marry a girl from *Victoria*!'

He didn't know what it meant. Nor did he want to get into trouble at home for asking such an extremely personal question. It was to do with marriage and probably a taboo subject. In later life he risked two disastrous marriages. One with an American girl and one with an English lady. 'But I've always studiously avoided Victorian girls', he adds with a twinkle.

Spring game in 1930, and in the morning Miss Livingstone picked up her groceries every day as usual. Mr Harpur got no visits. The letters piled up in the K-L pigeon-hole. So he asked Mr Holmes to ask Miss Livingstone how her sister was.

'Oh, she's had a slight cold for the past week. Just a spring fever, I expect.' She didn't pick up the mail.

Every day the question was repeated.

'Oh, she's gone off her food . . .'

'She's not even talking to me now. A bit huffy I expect.'

'Well I don't know. She hasn't come downstairs for her meals for two weeks.'

'If she hasn't got the courtesy to talk to me, I'm certainly not going to break the ice!'

Finally Mr Harpur and Mr Holmes talked to the stationmaster. He was the nearest official Dora Creek had to a policeman. They decided to take two of the town's leading fishermen, Charlie Seaton and Charlie Seaton, to pay the Livingstones a visit.

The five husky men walked along the river bank to offer help and perhaps take the sister to the doctor's surgery on the hill. They stood outside and Mr Harpur walked up the front steps to knock on the door. He fell through the third step. White ants! The step's fragility could withstand the tiny, slim Miss Livingstone, but not Mr Harpur's bulky weight.

He stood on the veranda and as he was knocking, the wood gave an ominous cracking sound. Mr Harpur's foot went ankle deep through the veranda. Trying to keep his aplomb, he said:

'I've come to give the letters to your sister. Where is she?'

'Oh, she's upstairs as usual', said the other Miss Livingstone brightly. So Mr Harpur headed for the delicate spiral staircase. He hurried and only two steps were slightly damaged.

In the bedroom the air was far from fresh and it was obvious why this Miss Livingstone hadn't been to pick up her mail . . . why she had lost interest in food and why she didn't bother to leave the room. She was dead. Extremely so.

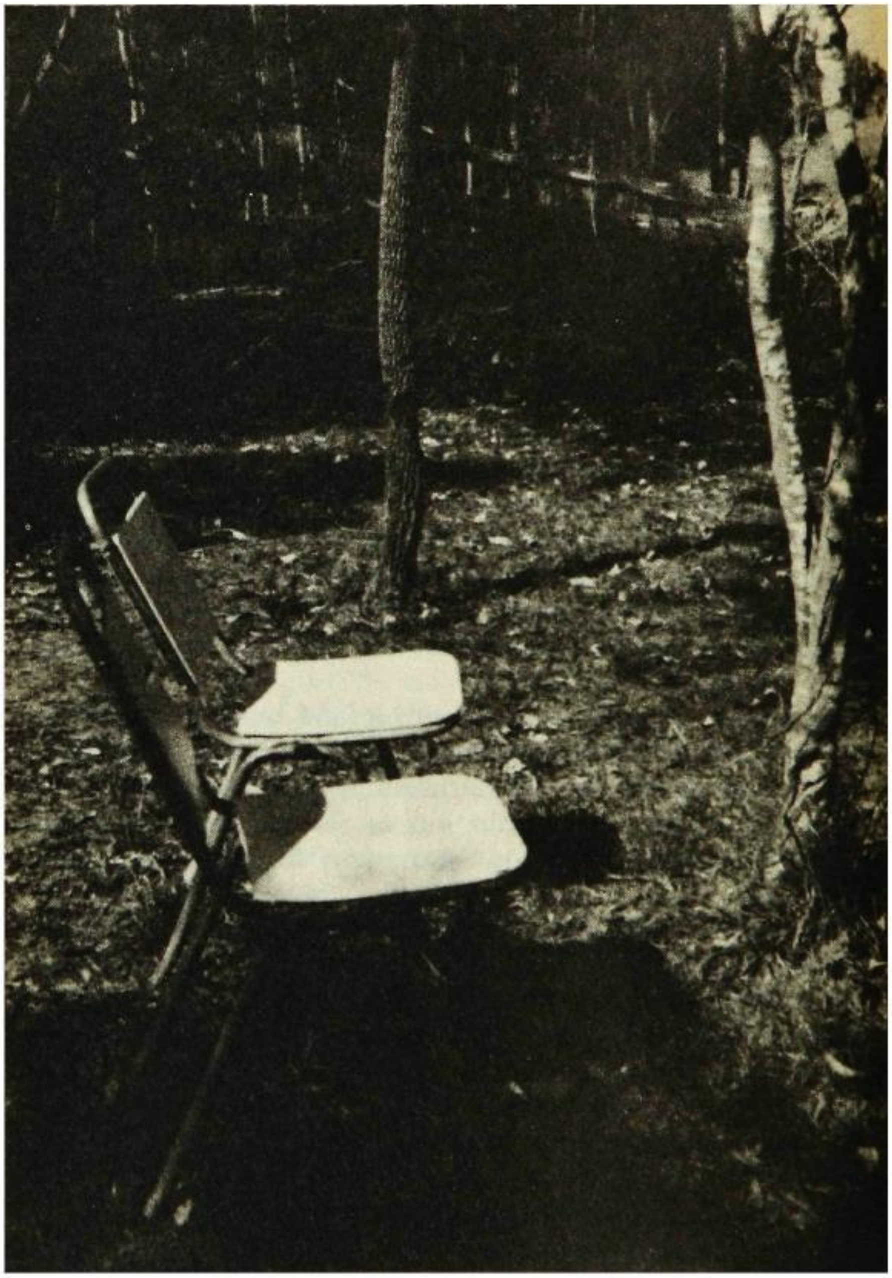
The doctor was called and arrived in his black sulky. He broke another step in the spiral staircase and went calf-deep through the landing on his way out. A small pine coffin was hurriedly knocked together by Charlie Seaton the boat builder. Five stout hearted Seatons carried it down to Livingstone's Corner. But then came the problem of how to get it up? Under the weight of five men, the front veranda collapsed. So two of the less burly Seatons headed for the spiral staircase with the coffin. They left a trail of broken steps behind them . . . to say nothing of a frantic, weeping Miss Livingstone. Her whole life was actually crumbling around her. She *knew* her way of coping with the problem was better!

Someone ran back to the township and brought one of the fishing boats. It had a shark's head, jaws open, mounted on the front, and smelt richly of the morning's catch. They used a rope and lowered the coffin out of the window. The Juliet balcony sagged under the strain and hung listlessly ever afterwards.

The remaining Miss Livingstone lived downstairs for a few months. Then her brother from England came to take her home. There were no farewells, no parting ceremony from the locals.

The old house stood empty. It gradually leant and crumbled as year after year the white ants completed their feast. No one thought to burn it down. No one ransacked it. No one threw stones at the windows. Although when the big hailstorm came the windows broke, and the lace curtains fluttered from the upstairs window in a ghostly way.

The hydrangeas, ferns and forget-me-nots crowded the garden and supported the weary picket fence for years. Livingstone's Corner was a landmark, a glimmer of Victorian elegance that the natives of Dora Creek would see but once.



Fifty years later there was no sign of the Livingstones' house. But in a slight clearing in the bush, exactly where their verandah would have been, I found two deserted chairs side by side, facing south to their favourite view of Dora Creek.

The Day They Buried Paddy O'Flathery

There was a marvellous story that came from my father's era in central west Queensland. It was the wake of Patrick O'Flathery.

Paddy had the pub in one of those far west towns on the red plain country. You know the sort of town, a couple of houses, a few shanties and a pub . . . not even a proper post office. Well the pub was a two-storey affair, just two little rooms one on top of the other, with a stairway outside. The bottom room was the pub, and Paddy slept upstairs. He'd never married, but there was a black gin, who used to come in mornings to get his breakfast and clean up downstairs.

Well this morning she came, Paddy wasn't up. He was still in bed. In fact he was dead. Dead as a door-nail. And it was mid summer. You know, so hot by 8.30 am, you couldn't see the horizon for mirages. It was like you were surrounded by a lake . . . a hot shimmering lake.

The blokes in the town were in a quandary. There ought to be a death certificate, but the nearest doctor was forty miles away. And there ought to be a proper funeral service, but the priest was sixty miles away. So they figured they'd have to do the best they could, by themselves. Well, it wasn't what you'd call a religious town . . . more a drinking town. But practical. One bloke, who had some packing cases out the back, went home and knocked up a sort of coffin. Just a long box, really. Of knotty pine. And another went round to see if he could rustle up a Bible from one of the womenfolk.

Then they got the mattock and spades. It was getting pretty hot by the time they set off. They decided to bury Paddy about three miles out of town, up on a little knoll where he used to spend some time. Somebody suggested using the cart, but they

figured that wasn't quite reverent enough. So four of them heaved the box on their shoulders and strode off very solemn. The bloke with the Bible carried the shovels and mattock and walked a few paces behind.

After a long hot sweaty three miles they set down the coffin for the last time. After they'd stretched their backs and loosened their shoulders, they started digging. The ground was hard and rocky, dust dry. They shovelled in turns, stopping to flick the sweat from their hats, mop their faces and roll a fag. It was a long job, but finally the grave was dug.

They tried to hand the coffin down. It wouldn't work. They needed rope, but no one had thought of it. Belts! That was it! So they unhitched their belts, buckled them together and carefully lowered Patrick O'Flathery down to his last resting place.

Campbell, who could read pretty well, took the Bible and looked at the back for a burying service. There wasn't one.

They pushed back their hats, scratched thoughtfully and rehitched their pants. Here was a problem. The priest was sixty miles away, Paddy was a Catholic, and they were Presos.

'I reckon a full hour's reading of the Bible would do. That should get him to where he's going', said Campbell. So they stood round the open grave in the midday sun, hats held across their hearts, heads bowed, thirsty as all get-up, while Campbell read the service. Fifteen minutes. The ground shimmered around them. Thirty minutes. Campbell's voice was hoarse. Forty-five minutes. The flies were buzzing in swarms. Finally the Bible hour was through.

They picked up the shovels, and the first clods thumped hollowly on the pine box. 'Ashes to ashes, dust to dust', said Campbell. After that they worked with a will. It wasn't the full six feet deep, but it was deep enough ... in that heat. Campbell paused and leaned on his shovel:

'Now we all agree Patrick O'Flathery was a fine bloke. He was never mean and I reckon he'd want his cobbers to hold a wake for him.'

So they agreed that, as Paddy wouldn't be needing the pub any more, he'd certainly be delighted if they opened the bar and had a darned good wake.

The walk back to town was hotter ... but faster. The thought of that beer filled their brains, and sped their feet. Finally about two in the afternoon, they stood under the

awning of the pub. The door was padlocked, so they trooped round the back. That door was padlocked, too. They climbed upstairs to Paddy's room to find the key. It wasn't on the chest of drawers. It wasn't under his pillow. In fact it wasn't anywhere. So Campbell walked over to the gin's shanty.

'We're fixing to have a wake for Mr O'Flathery. Would you know where he keeps the key?'

'Key in his 'jamas Boss. Always in the top pocket, Boss!'

'Ruddy old coot didn't trust a soul!' muttered Campbell.

There was a deal of talk in front of the pub. They could bust the padlock, but it wouldn't be respectable . . . breaking into a dead man's property. Not fitting or proper for a wake.

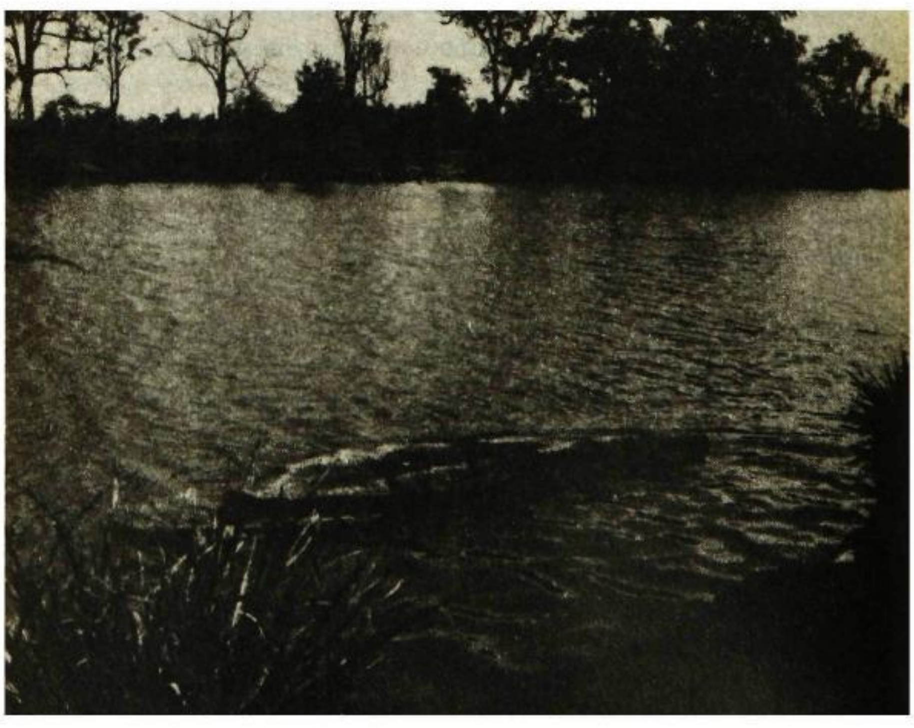
So they headed back on the knoll, hammer, mattock, shovels, Bible and all. After they dug up old O'Flathery, found the key, nailed up the coffin again real quick, they gave him another decent burial. With another hour from the Bible for good measure. They didn't want to upset him. When the last shovelful of earth was smoothed down, the sun was setting. They loped and ran all the three miles back to the Pub.

The key fitted. The padlock sprung open. There was a cheer. And you know, they say Paddy O'Flathery had the longest darn wake in the whole of the west. It lasted till the grog ran out. And as there weren't many around to mourn him, that was a fair stretch.

Molly's Rock

Just past Livingstone's Corner was a small, sloping island of rock that appeared at low tide. It was green and slippery and known as Molly's Rock. We used to moor the boat there and use the rocky bank as a landing stage on 'visiting days', when my mother had afternoon tea with Mrs Waddell, the doctor's wife.

They lived in the west side of the township in a house that had wide verandas. The windows were always closed and the



Molly's Rock had seen a tragedy in 1911 when Molly Case and her fiancé drowned at a pre-Christmas picnic at the creek.

blinds drawn. So the sitting room was dark and gloomy. Slivers of sunlight revealed galaxies of dust motes in the air ... high-lighted the black satin cushions and made the stuffed satin fruit glint delectably. So delectably that I once tried to suck them off the corner of the cushion, to my mother's horror.

For hours before these afternoon tea parties, I was primed at home. 'Say "no" to the tea! Just ask for milk. And *don't forget* to say *please*', said my mother insistently. 'Remember, you mustn't *touch* anything. Just look! I'll give you a nod, and you hold your hands behind your back until I smile. Then everything will be all right.'

The instruction went on forever:

'And whatever you do, *don't* eat the cakes! They're bought and we don't know *where* they've been. Just eat a small jam tart ... or the cucumber sandwiches. When you've finished, come to me and I'll wipe your hands. And then remember to hold them behind your back again.'

As she was dressing me, the lecture would go on:

'Remember, you mustn't interrupt while we're talking. If you want to say anything, come to my elbow and wait till everyone's finished. Then you must say "Excuse me".'



My mother and I set off for an afternoon tea party.

No wonder I preferred to stay behind with my father working on the farm when afternoon tea days came round. But my social graces could not be neglected.

'Now listen to me! If they give you a book to look at, always, *always* turn the page from the *outside*. Never near the spine. That tears the pages! We'll see if you can be a good girl this time. Yes, you can take just one doll . . . but *not* the Teddy Bear!'

My favourite of all toys was 'Teddy'. He had been handed down from Aunty Alice's five daughters, one to the other, and then to me. So at twenty years old he was mostly hairless. His chest was definitely consumptive, because the stuffing and squeaker had subsided stomachwards. His ears were chewed ragged, but his shoe-button eyes were black and bright as ever. I loved him dearly.

On afternoon tea days my father would row us down to Molly's Rock at 2.30, so we could knock at the door exactly at three o'clock. We would be waiting for him at the Rock at five o'clock.

'Take great care! That's a dangerous rock', he'd say. 'Be careful you don't slip. Remember what happened to Molly.'

The water always looked murky and green round the rock as if it was cloyed with sad memories of that romantic picnic years ago. Molly slipped off the rock after lunch.

'One should never *never* go swimming after eating. She probably got cramps', said my English-bred mother. 'One certainly shouldn't go in the water for three hours after a meal.'

'Well, maybe one hour is enough in summer', said my father who loved swimming.

Actually Molly didn't go swimming. She slipped off the rock in her 1911 picnic frock, with its big petticoats and skirt. She couldn't swim and her fiancé dived in fully clothed to save her. Romantically they died in each other's arms, and they were buried together in Morisset graveyard.

The lovers' grave is still there. On the front of the headstone used to be a faded photograph of a pretty eighteen year old girl with wide fluffed Gibson Girl hair. Her fiancé looked rather straight-laced and honourable, the sort of man who wouldn't take his clothes off in front of a lady. Even to save her.

Everyone who lived at Dora Creek from 1918 onwards knew

positively her name was Molly—but on cleaning the moss and lichen off the headstone I discovered her name was actually Polly Case and she died 11 December 1911. It didn't take long to distort a legend.

The Barn

When you pushed open the heavy wooden door, it was always warm and dark inside. A secret musty place, scattered with chaff and corn, and filled with the pleasant friendly smell of mice.

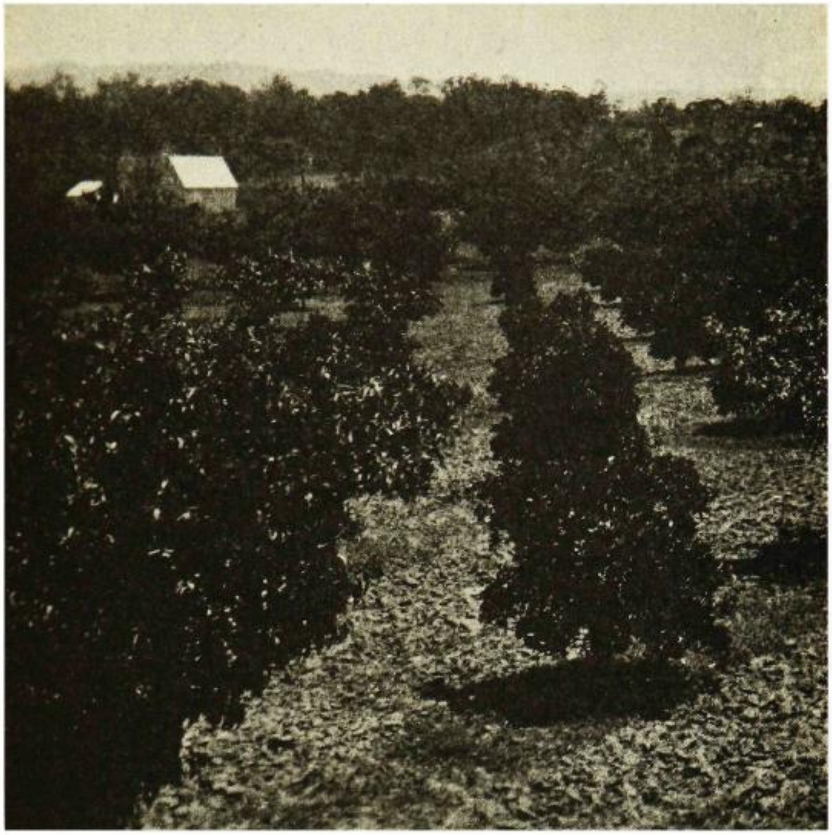
They squeaked and chittered and scurried for cover when I arrived. I'd scramble up the bulging bags to my favourite spot in the loft. Sitting quietly with my bare legs dangling over the rafters, I'd nibble grains of scattered wheat and corn. Then gradually one mouse would appear, nose twitching as he nervously polished his whiskers. Then another and another, until the whole family of little grey creatures was busy again, the intrusion forgotten.

A sleepy owl, perched high in the pitched roof, would glower at me with golden eyes and then doze off again. After the floods there would sometimes be a slim, green tree snake curled round a rafter and a frog or two, green as shining leaves.

In this twilight world all was quiet and you could hear the faraway sounds of the farm activity outside. In the distance I could hear the hammer blows of someone mending a shed . . . Arne calling to Love . . . a cow munching grass close by . . . chooks scratching for worms beneath the barn . . . the squeak and groan of a post as the horse scratched his neck . . a wild duck taking off in a noisy flutter of wings and water . . . the calf mooing for his mother . . . pigs snuffling . . . and the regular slop-slick sound of my father making butter in the dairy.

Making butter was a twice weekly ritual. First the milk would be poured in a flat, wide enamel pan. Each day the cream would be skimmed off and put in an enamel billy-can standing in a dish of water with a damp cloth over the top and trailing in the water. This kept the cream fresh and cool.

When three days' cream was collected, the billy-can would be sealed with a special lid, then carefully strapped to the



Across the orchard, the barn stood high and proud on its ridge near the swamp.

rocker of the butter machine. By turning a handle the rocker rocked and the cream slip-slopped inside the billy-can. In about twenty minutes there was a pound of creamy butter and a glass of thin sweet butter-milk. While I drank the butter-milk, my father added the salt to the butter and slapped it into a nice big cube. It was carefully finished off with a criss-cross texture from the grooved butter-pats.

Sometimes when I grew older, I was allowed to make little butter balls for mother for tea. You had to roll the dob of butter between the bats until it was perfectly round. Then drop it in a billy of cool water. Floating and jostling in the water, they'd be taken home across the paddocks, as a big surprise.

Outside the barn door were three steps made of thick stumps. Upright, they nestled in a tight circle and made

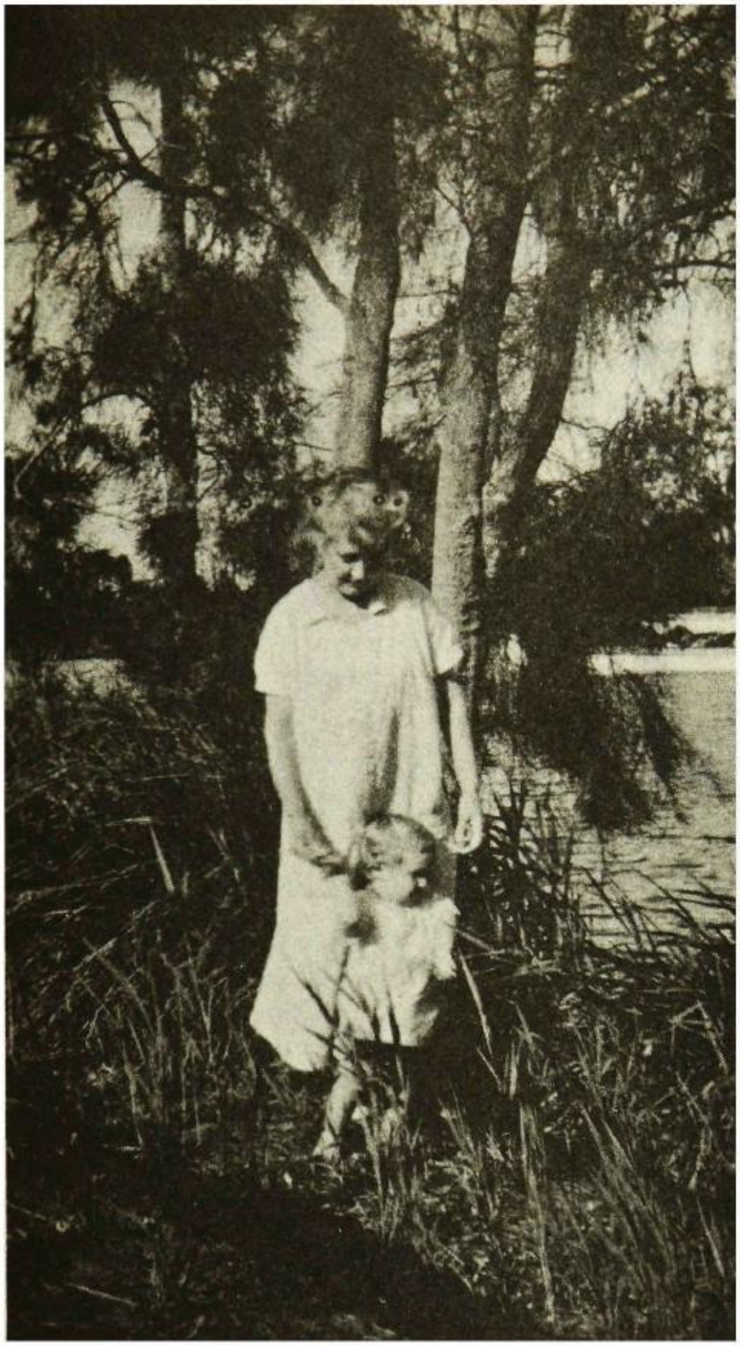
comfortable seats for working on a broken harness or sharpening ploughs. When the Clydesdale needed his hooves trimmed, my father would sit on the bottom step with his hammer and chisel. Dick the horse would settle his huge feathery hoof on the middle step and the thick rind of toe-nail would soon be chopped away.

Then my father would get out his pocket knife and hone the blade on his whetstone. It was sharp enough when it could cut the hairs on his arm! Now was the time for the finishing touch to Dick's feet. Each hoof would be carefully pared until the new cut was as smooth as silk. I would plant myself within inches of the operation, and check each hoof with a small finger to feel for any bumps or burrs. Often I'd gather milkweeds or get a skirtful of chaff to feed Dick, while he waited so patiently.

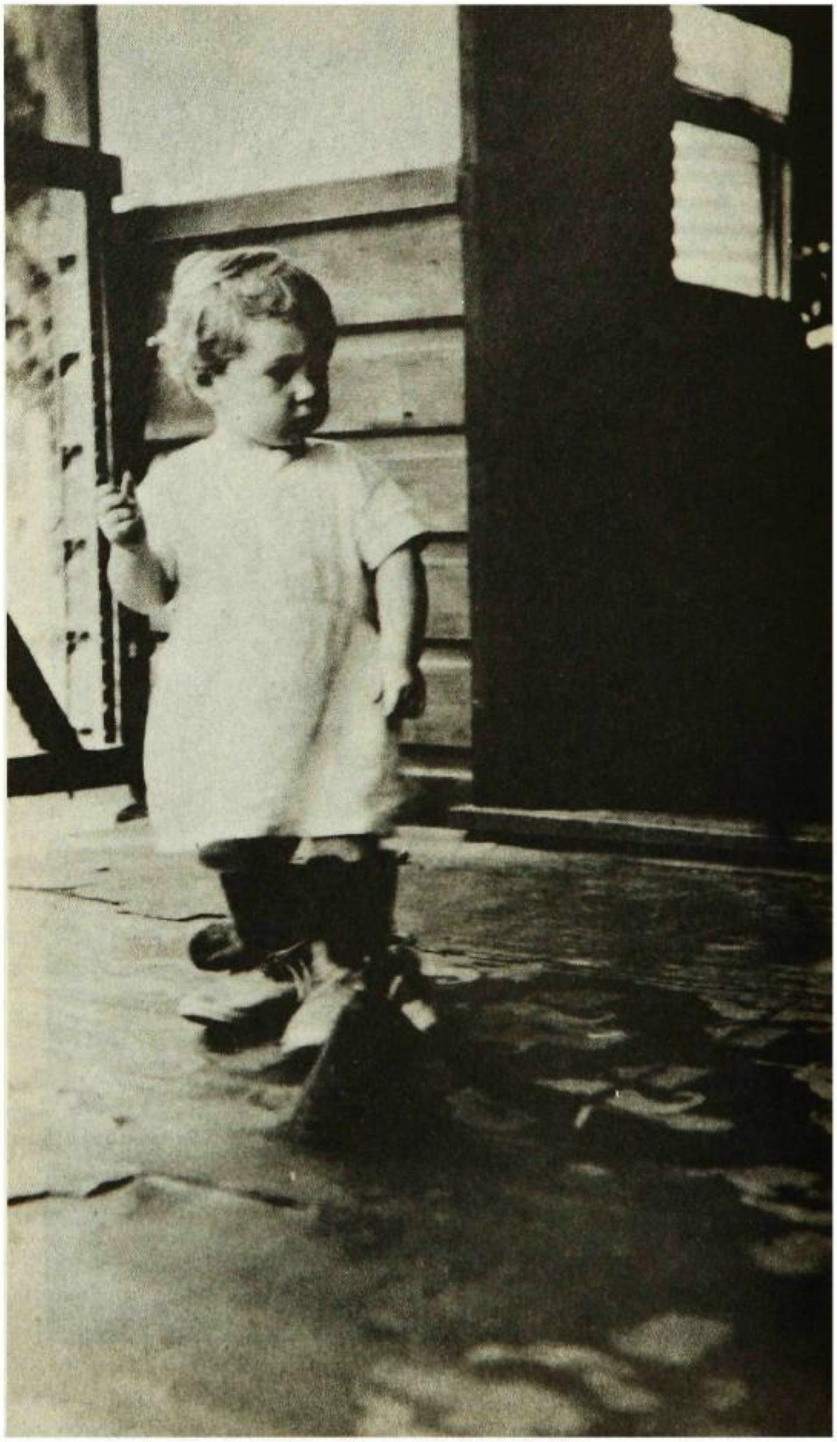
Old Dick was a very important part of the farm. My father's workmate. In winter they ploughed and harrowed together. Dick pulled the cart through the orchard at picking time. He dragged home the piles of firewood that my father cut from the bush. He strained and pulled at stumps when my father was clearing another paddock. He was a gentle giant who felt he was part of the family.

However his friendly overtures terrified my mother. She was drying her long dark hair in the sun one afternoon. The house paddock gate faced west and was very comfortable to lean one's head over. She relaxed and lazily shook the sun through her hair. It was shining clean and almost dry. Old Dick ambled across the paddock. There was something on *his* gate. That's where my father fed him, where his nosebag hung. My mother was dozing off in the afternoon sun when suddenly she felt a tug on her hair. Dick was contentedly munching on the ends, leaving it covered with slimy green spittle. She was most unreasonable, and didn't see his point at all. Actually she was quite paranoid about Dick, and was convinced he wanted to trample her to death. But he was only being friendly.

When I was about twenty months old, Dick followed my mother and me into the dairy. Well, he got as much of himself inside as the eight by eight room would allow. My mother was bailed up in the corner, close to hysterics. 'Get him out, Get him out!' she screamed, forgetting that I was the only person there. I can clearly remember walking between his front legs and under his brown belly. It was like a ceiling above me. I



When I was twenty months old. . .



trotted round the back end and grabbed his tail. I pulled very hard and he got the message. Very carefully he backed out, moving each foot tentatively before he put any weight on it. Then of course when my mother recovered, she realised her only child had been round the kicking end of the monster. She had another quick nervy-breakdown and refused ever to go to the dairy again. As far as I know she never did.

Dick wasn't a young horse. In fact he was rather elderly and never went faster than a sedate amble. No one had ever seen him canter or even trot and his four feet were never more than a few inches off the ground. And then only one at a time. He was so quiet, I could ride him standing upright on the huge platform of his rump.

So when Jean, Roderick and John came from Yenda, the family thought it would be nice to have a photograph of us all riding Dick, en masse. A sack was thrown over his back, and we were hoisted up, one behind the other. Now something must have clicked in Dick's brain. Some memory from his coltish days: 'Children like to ride... Children sounded happy... Children sounded happier when I trotted...'



Old Dick never went faster than a sedate amble.

So wonder upon wonder, Dick walked a little faster and he actually ambled rather gaily, and then all his massive weight broke into a trot. The bouncing was unbelievable. We were sitting with our short legs straight out. He was so fat, there was nothing to grip on to. The bag started to slip. We started to slip. And in four bounces we were sans steed, in mid-air, plummeting to earth.

Dick stopped in mid-trot and looked round at us. You could almost see his disappointment, a doleful shrug: 'Ah well, back to the ploughing.' He had tried so hard to make us happy. So we gathered armfuls of milkweed and tried to cheer him up.

We often rode him after that but he never did more than a slow trudge.

The Home-Made Wireless

When my father built our wireless in 1927, it was the first and only one in the district for many years. Well until 1934 anyway. It added many dimensions to our life. Some good, some bad. From my point of view, it had one big drawback.

I listened to the Uncle 'Hello Man' every morning on 2FC. He was like God. He knew everything. He knew all about birthdays, which was very nice. He'd say: 'There's a little girl called Barbara who lives in Dora Creek, and she's four today! Hello Barbara! If you go into the sitting room, you'll find a string on the doorknob. Now I want you to follow that string and you will find a lovely surprise. It's a birthday present from your Aunty Max in Sydney. She says Happy Birthday to you!'

Sure enough, I'd follow the string up and down through three rooms and there would be the present!

He also seemed to know when I was going to Sydney. And *somehow* he knew I *hated* picking up chips for the fire. He said he had sent his personal Kookaburra to watch me. Sure enough that Kookaburra sat on our clothes-line every morning. Checking up on me. I knew if he told the 'Hello Man' that I'd been naughty, the word would get back to Santa Claus. Messages from that wretched Kookaburra were relayed over 2FC every few weeks, and he certainly had noticed my misdemeanours. In detail! I would pick up the saucepan of chips from the wood-heap every morning, watching that Kookaburra over my shoulder. Sometimes when I got a splinter in my finger, he would throw back his head and laugh. I hated him.

But I always listened to the 'Hello Man', because there was a deep-seated thrill when you heard your own name called over the wireless. And his warnings were always tempered with something nice.

Probably the first really happy news that came over the air-

waves in 1927 was the news of Child Endowment. Five shillings a child a week, paid to mothers in N.S.W.

'What a God-send for Alice and Annie', said my mother as she refilled my father's big breakfast cup with tea. Aunty Alice Curran had five young daughters (one deaf and dumb) and an invalid husband with a wooden leg, who found it tough going to plough and work the lemon orchard. Alice's sister, Aunty Annie Temperley, had five young sons and a matching invalid husband. Living in the city, even before the Depression, was hard going with so many mouths to feed.

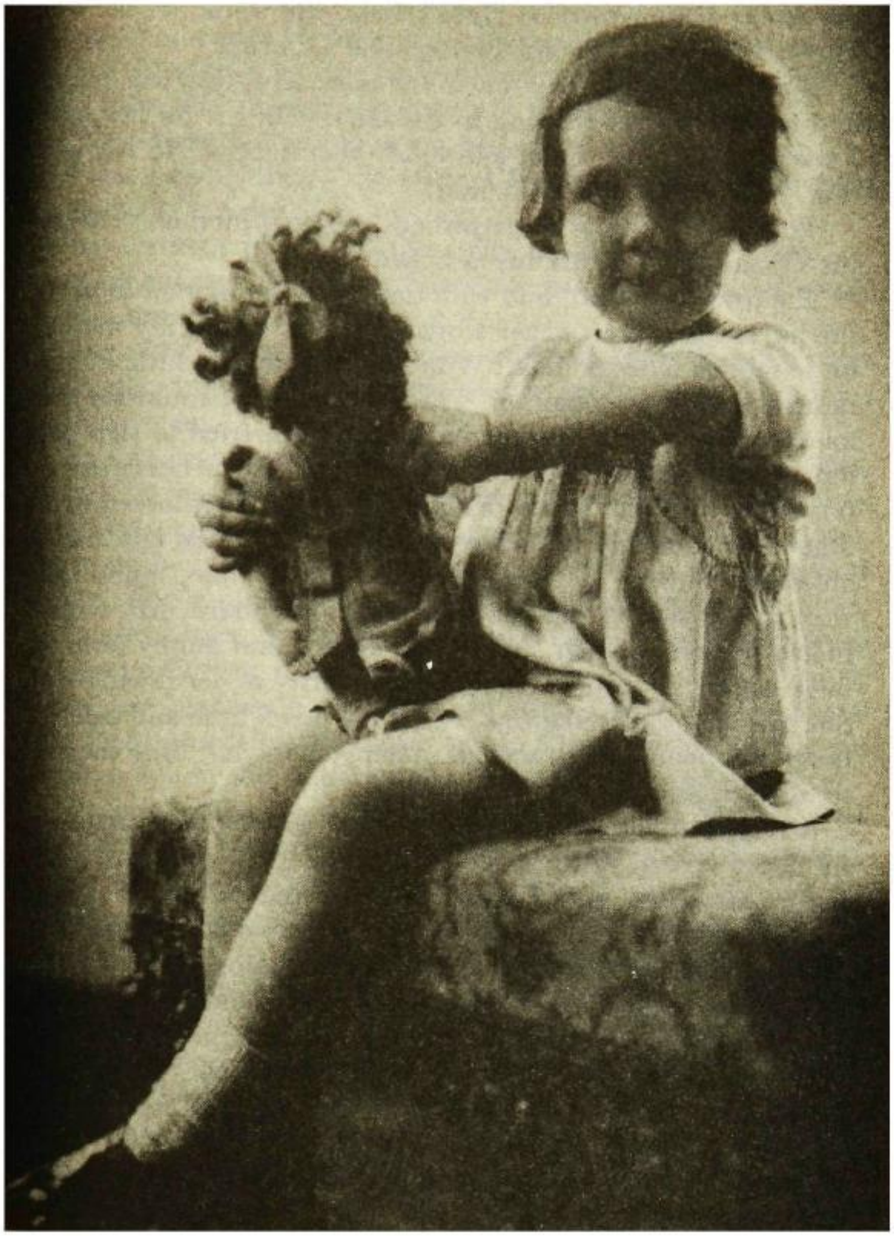
The wireless was turned on at dinner-time, when we listened to the midday news. Those were the days when the news started and finished with 'Advance Australia Fair'. At this period we had a pet frog called Billy. He was big and green and he lived in the skirting board of our kitchen veranda. It was a tiny one inch square under the quad, but he managed to squeeze in. We often watched him relax his bones and change his form to fit the narrow shape.

Well, Billy had an ear for music, but the only tune he really appreciated was 'Advance Australia Fair'. Every time it came on the wireless . . . midday, sunset or at breakfast . . . he would start croaking, good and loud. When the music stopped, he stopped! He became so famous, neighbours would turn up at news-time, just to hear him sing.

We had lots of other frogs who lived in the door jambs on every veranda, but they never showed any musical appreciation.

There were a million frogs in the swamp and they had a sing-song every night. There was a strong basso-profundo who called throatily: 'Who's got my saucepan? Who's got my saucepan?' Then the whole swamp chorus would answer: 'We've got your saucepan! We've got your saucepan!' The opera would go on all night. It was the music that droned me to sleep. I would sing along with them until I finally dozed off.

On the frog theme, there was a delightful drama caused by my Aunty Max's horror of frogs. Or rather the horror of killing them. She chopped one green beauty in half one day while she was hoeing the garden. So she went into the export business. I was only a baby and she purloined the big empty Glaxo tins. She caught every frog she could, and popped them in the tins. Each tin would imprison about two dozen frogs. Then when



There was a deep-seated thrill when you heard your own name called. . .

the family rowed down to Dora Creek, she would let the frogs find a new home beyond Livingstone's Corner.

This day, it was ladies' day in the boat. My Aunt was rowing and my mother was sitting in the back with me on her knee. I started to squawl, good and loud. Wet nappy? No it wasn't that. Wind? Not it wasn't that.

'Poor little thing, she's famished', said my mother. 'Pass me the Glaxo and I'll mix her a bottle.'

The tin was passed, and with one hand my mother loosened the lid. Twenty-four eager frogs leapt out! On to my mother, on to me, all over the boat! What a scramble! My little English mother stood up screaming. The boat rocked. I squawled even louder. My Aunt let go the oars, stood up, tried to step back out of frog-range, and fell on her back like a beetle in the bottom of the boat. It was bedlam! Then the frogs locked in the other tins suddenly got news of the freedom-frogs and started croaking. Finally the escaped frogs, one by one, found their way up the side of the boat and leapt overboard. My mother pulled herself together. My Aunt, all wet and sloppy from the bilge water, scrambled back to the security of her rowing-seat. She grabbed the Glaxo tins, eased the lids a little and chucked them overboard, frogs and all. That was the last time she ever tried to export the frog population.

But back to the wireless: and the incredible part it played in the Dora Creek political scene after the 1932 elections, when Lang was voted out. I went with my parents to the voting booth in Dora Creek school-house. It was a solemn occasion and the atmosphere was thick with tension. The Charlie Seatons and other fishermen were in groups muttering. Everyone looked very severe and I clung to my father's big hand.

Our friends, the Morgans, the doctor, Mr Holmes the grocer and Mr Russell shook hands gravely and said quietly, 'Good Luck! We're going to need it.'

Then Mr Tilse and Mr Dunlevy, the school teacher joined the group. My father said:

'Well, we'll be listening to the wireless tonight. If the *right* side wins, I'll fire the gun three times at midnight.'

'Good idea!' said Mr Tilse, whom we seldom saw. 'I'll be able to hear it. Why, they'll even to be able to hear it in Dora Creek.' He wandered off to chat with fat, grizzle-headed Mr Tafe the butcher.

My father collected my mother who was talking with Mrs Morgan and Mrs Holmes. We elbowed our way to the polling booth through a heavy gang of fishermen, noisily headed by Mr Tafe. My mother clung to my father's arm.

'You *do* know how to vote, May?' he asked.

'Yes. I remember', she said. 'I'll remember. I won't make a mistake, my dear.'

As we came out, Mr Tilse called to my father.

'Don't forget, Malcolm! Shoot the gun if the *right side* wins!'

He nodded.

Everyone in Dora Creek was eager to know the outcome. And the Sunday newspapers didn't arrive until Monday's midday train.

So that night my mother and father sat around the wireless, twiddling the cat's whiskers. As the results came through, they sounded happier and happier. Lang was beaten! Lang was out. So at midnight my father went outside and fired the gun three times. The sound echoed through the bush, across the river, around the hills. Everyone within four miles would have heard it. And everyone did. They were delighted, because they all knew the 'right side' had won. In Dora Creek the fishermen got drunk and celebrated their cause. Two Charlie Seatons got a black eye in the celebrations. They'd won! Again!

Unfortunately when the train chuffed in at midday, the station master picked up the bundle of papers that was thrown from the guard's van. 'LANG OUT' read the headlines on the *Sunday Sun*. As a staunch Laborite his angry bellow could be heard down in the village. Within minutes Dora Creek was in an uproar. The noonday quiet was rent with shouting. Their 'right side' was not Malcolm McDonald's! The traitor! The fishermen *knew* they could never trust a blighty orchardist!

Arnold Morgan got our groceries and mail that week and the next week, too. In fact it was quite some time before we went down the creek again. Even the Doctor and Mr Holmes didn't want to admit they were friends of the McDonalds. My father didn't send his produce by rail to the Sydney Markets. Instead he loaded it on the dray, harnessed up Old Dick and plodded through the bush to Avondale where he sold it at half price.

Mr Tilse never spoke to us again! His little brow-beaten wife came down one afternoon to see my mother while he was in town. She hoped we'd understand. She seldom went into the

village, and her only friends were my mother and Mrs Morgan. Now she wasn't allowed to have 'the traitors' in her house any more. Politics must have made it a lonely life for some country women in 1932.

One morning my father twiddled the cat's whiskers, and through the crackles the wireless man told that the first regular mail plane from Sydney to Newcastle and Brisbane was leaving today. It would be over Newcastle about 11 o'clock. So we stood outside, scanning the sky from 9.30 onwards. Sure enough it flew low over the house. We waved like mad with tea-towels and the pilot waved back to us. We could actually see his hand. We could clearly see the letters on the under-side of the lower wing: VH and some numbers. Imagine! A real man in a real aeroplane. It was the first time I'd seen an actual aeroplane, except for pictures in the paper of Kingsford Smith. Like his, this one had double wings and a lot of wire holding it together.

The plane skimmed over the trees and as I watched it got smaller and smaller. I started to cry.

'What about the man? He'll get squashed! Look the plane is getting smaller . . . and smaller! He'll never fit! Daddy! Look! It's no bigger than my thumb now! What's happening to the man?'

I wailed. It was hard to explain to me and I really didn't believe them. I *knew* that man was getting horribly squashed. I could see it quite clearly with my own eyes.

It was like the time we had gone to Sydney when I was four. We were going in to David Jones' new Elizabeth Street Store, to have lunch with my Aunty Max. She was Advertising Manager there and the Uncle 'Hello Man' joined us. I marvelled that he knew I'd be in Sydney. While standing looking up Market Street, I noticed the trams whizzing along Elizabeth Street, apparently straight into David Jones' corner store. There was no way they were going to get me into *that* shop, with wild trams on the rampage. I lay on the footpath and yelled my head off. When my father picked me up I tried to struggle out of his arms. He hadn't seen the danger. They wouldn't listen to me screaming reasons. I was panic stricken!

We went in a noisy threesome through the big glass doors and I must admit it was quite a surprise not to find any trams inside. I couldn't quite figure out where they'd gone to.

Then over lunch, sitting in a high chair, I told them about the trams. It was an amazing revelation, after lunch, when they took me for a ride on the Elizabeth Street tram. It *didn't* go into David Jones. It went all along Elizabeth Street to the Quay. Life certainly was full of surprises. Things weren't always quite what they seemed. But one shouldn't be too careful.

Night-Time

Tonight, in my mountain hideaway, I lit the Tilly lamp and with the bright white light, the memories came flooding back. The hiss of the gas . . . the fumey smell . . . the lamp of my childhood had an elegant waisted brass base, a tall glass chimney and a milk-glass shade. It stood on the big kitchen table of scrubbed pine. My mother sat comfortably in a cane rocking chair, nursing me on her lap. The kitchen stove was crackling happily and spitting the occasional fiery cinder. My father sat at the table, near the lamp, reading to us. Such old delights as *Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn, The Three Musketeers, Anne of Green Gables, Two Years Before the Mast, When We Were Very Young, Peter Pan, The Winning of Barbara Worth, From Log Cabin to White House,* the poems of Banjo Paterson, *Lunatic at Large,* short stories from W. W. Jacobs, Conrad and Runyon and Norman Lindsay. How vivid were the pictures. How shared the chuckles. If we enjoyed a paragraph, we'd insist that he read it again. They were warm, happy winter nights.

Sometimes when it was very cold, especially on Saturday nights, we'd light the open fire in the sitting room. Then we'd pull up the chairs and sit around toasting big rounds of home-made bread on a long wire toasting prong. It went well with hot bowls of soup. My mother would tell how she'd toasted chestnuts round coal fires in England. We'd never seen chestnuts and found it very hard to imagine them.

The great log would burn fiercely, then glow into a great solid mass of ember, with flickering spurts of flame. Then the game was to find pictures in the fire, and make up stories that changed and developed as we watched. Later at cocoa time, our mugs brimming with frothy milky chocolate, my father would look hopefully towards the piano.

'What about a bit of music, May? You're not too tired?'

'Oh yes Muvver! Let's sing! Let's sing!'

It always seemed so fresh, as if it had never happened before. Yet it happened every Saturday night. It was a special treat.

The candles would be lit on the polished brass candle-brackets that swung out from the piano. My mother would look in her piano stool and bring out the favourites. Some were music hall ditties, some were ballads like 'Drink to Me Only with Thine Eyes', but the best came from a heavy black leather book called *Sankey's Hymns*. My father would stand beside her and turn the pages as we sang. I loved to hear him sing, but my mother always said he was 'out of tune' . . . whatever that meant. It sounded perfect to me. Good and strong and secure. All was right in the world. In perfect harmony.

On those nights I would curl up in the rocking chair by the fire and doze off, while my mother played her drawing room favourites. The 'Barcarole' was always a sign it was bedtime. My father would pick me up and, if it was Sunday, we'd wind up the clock on the mantlepiece. It had come from Grandma McDonald's home. He told me that when he was a little boy, *his* father had lifted *him* up to wind it every Sunday night.

The clock was made of dark wood with a high pointed roof, guarded by two little pointed curly towers. The glass above the clock face had a painting of two children playing in a green and flowery meadow. I liked to trace their figures with my finger. We would open the glass door and take the key that lay beneath the brass pendulum. I would fit this carefully into the left hole of the clock face, and my father would wind up 'the time'.

'You must always be very careful not to over-wind the spring', he cautioned.

The right hole wound up the chimes, and I was allowed to turn the key, half-turn by half-turn. How satisfying to know Time was of our making! On Sunday nights, we set the pattern for the next week, all of the next seven days: wash day, ironing day, shopping day, baking day, cleaning day, picnic day and visitor's day.

Winding the clock was a sacred ritual. It had the same feeling as saying Grace before each meal: 'Lord, for what we are about to receive, make us truly thankful.' I always thought my mother should get a mention, but my father explained we were thanking the Lord for having such a good cook! Of course we always told my mother how nice the food was after the first mouthful.

Some nights of course were filled with drama. Like the one when the house started rocking, and the willow-pattern plate crashed off the mantelpiece in the kitchen. There was a sort of growl outside. We thought the brindle cow had broken in to the house paddock. She was always a bad tempered creature. So my father went out to shoo her off with a big stick. He came in white faced: 'It's not the cow! The earth's moving under my feet! Come out quick and feel it!'

It was incredible. The earth was tremoring. It was like standing on the belly of a huge sleeping animal. You could feel the heart-beat. I was very disappointed when it stopped, and tried hard that night to stay awake, in case it happened again.

Then there was the night my father finished building the wireless set. He had bought a book written by Marconi. It was filled with diagrams. He wrote to Anthony Horderns' and they sent all the bits and pieces: silvery valves, black knobs, lots of wire with little U-shaped pieces on the end, beautiful green and red coils that were called 'cat's whiskers', and a big square of black, shiny zylonite. My father had built a large box, dove-tailed at the corners, and French polished with shellac. The zylonite fitted in the top, to hold all the knobs and the cat's whiskers. He had worked on building the wireless every evening, on the kitchen table.

I remember the excitement of the night, when the last bit of soldering was done and the zylonite top was fitted into place. It was eight o'clock. We were in time to catch the 2FC broadcast from Sydney, which only went for a couple of hours every night. Father twiddled the cat's whiskers very slowly. Through a hole in the side of the box, I could see the valves glowing red. Then suddenly the machine gave a whining squeal, very high pitched. My father looked excited. Carefully he tuned some of the knobs, and suddenly we heard someone singing.

'It's Caruso!' said my mother. We got closer and listened with great care. But soon the voice faded. There were crackles and whines from the speaker. Then nothing. Yet there was no storm brewing.

'It could be the aurora australis', said my father. We went out on the bathroom veranda. Sure enough, there was a faint flickering in the southern sky. 'Well that's all we'll hear tonight', he said. 'We'll try again tomorrow.'

Brief as the singing had been, it had been a miracle. Imagine



It was a mirror-still evening on the creek when the lunatic escaped from Morriset Asylum.

hearing something as far away as Sydney. Eighty miles away!

'I wonder what they'll think of next?' said my mother. 'Aeroplanes and now this.'

There was another exciting night that started at dusk, when Arnold Morgan came.

'A lunatic escaped from Morisset Asylum yesterday!' he said excitedly.

(Now as the sun had already set, we knew he meant 'today'. It was often a little confusing to have a neighbour whose religious-day went from sunset to sunset. If he came in the evening, and said he was going to plough *today*, he really meant *tomorrow*.)

Anyway this evening, Arnold told us the escapee was a murderer and had last been seeing heading westwards towards our district. A search party was organised, and the menfolk set off with double-barrel shotguns. The women and children were told to stay indoors and keep the doors and windows locked. My father left us with a loaded gun on the table.

It was summer and my mother and I were securely locked in the kitchen. There were four unprotected verandas and a sitting room with flimsy glass French doors. She hadn't handled

a gun in her life. Dark was falling and she lit the lamp. We sat very quietly in the kitchen. She tried to read me a story, but kept pausing to listen and say: 'What was that? What was that noise?'

The dog was on the kitchen veranda sleeping. He wasn't on the prowl that night. No doubt he'd have barked if anyone approached the house. The hours crept by and we counted the half-hour chimes of the clock in the sitting room. The vulnerable endangered sitting room with double French doors on two walls.

Finally my father returned. He called from the orchard to let us know it was him. A nervous trigger-happy wife would be no happy homecoming.

'Did they get him? Are we safe?' called my mother.

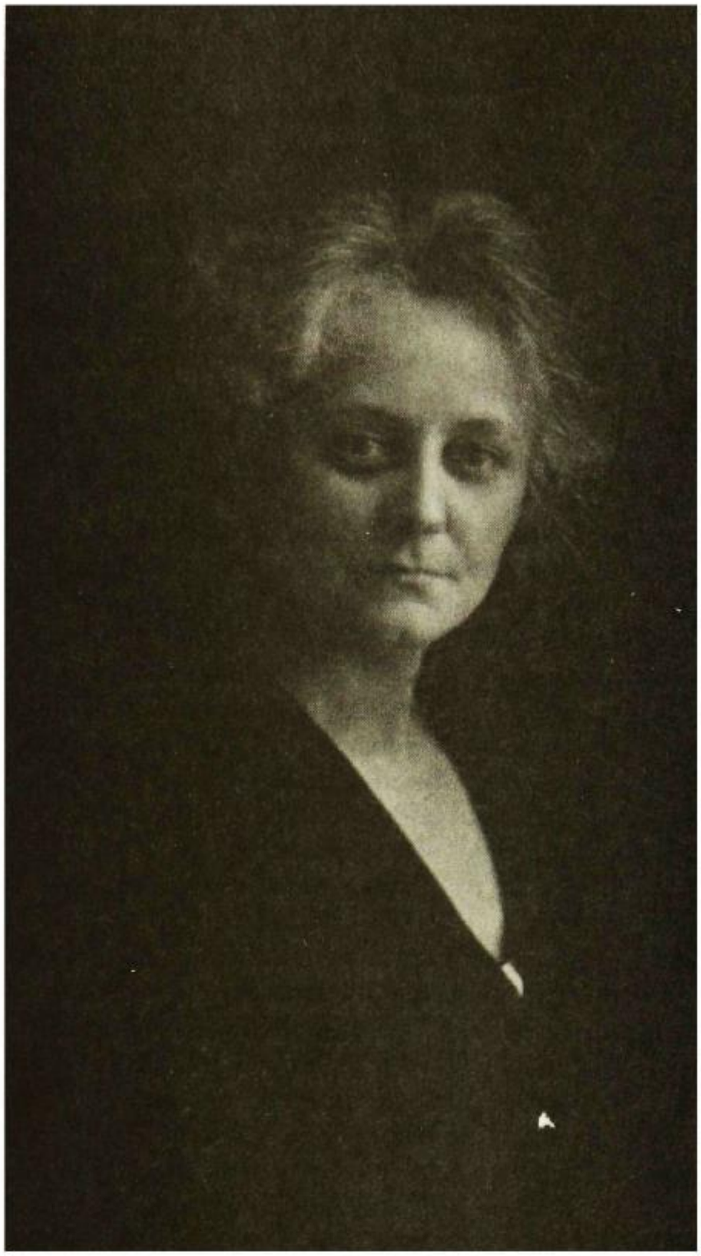
'Yes, yes my dear. We found him down at the quince tree on the opposite bank.' He gave a broad grin. 'There he was sitting on the bank, stark naked. Seems he was planning to swim the river, but the mozzies took his mind off the plan. He was so busy slapping 'em, he forgot all about swimming. Poor binder! He could have walked across the sand-bar there, clothes and all, and got clean away. Looked a decent enough chap, you know. Seemed glad to see us. We helped him get dressed and they took him back to the asylum. You'd never think he could have murdered anyone, sitting there slapping mosquitoes! Poor blighter!'

My mother made cups of tea while I toasted some bread. My father opened up the house. Then we sat round the kitchen table, and he told us the whole story of the hunt in great detail. We wanted to hear everything . . . what everyone had done . . . what everyone had said.

There was another night I remember. A frightening night that happened when I was about eight or nine. My mother had one of her 'willies'. That's what she jokingly called her heart-attacks. It was after dinner and the heart bromide fizz-pills hadn't worked. Her breathing was very faint and she was lying very still on the settee in the kitchen. She didn't open her eyes to give us a reassuring wink, as she usually did. The lamplight showed how grey she was.

My father felt her pulse and looked at me.

'You'll have to go down to the Morgans, and ask them to get the doctor,' he said quietly. 'We need him quickly.'



My mother in 1927.

He lit the hurricane lamp and buttoned me into my coat.

'Go on now', he said, as he sat down beside my mother, remote, in his own anguish.

She had never been this bad before. I suddenly knew she was dying, and I was very frightened. I was frightened at losing her. When I got out into the starless night, I was even more frightened of the dark. I could only see the patch of lantern light at my feet. The shadows closed in around me. It was fear of the dark and the unknown that only children know.

I stumbled over a root of the big oak tree. It was on the path where I often played. It was like my last contact with home. It was strong. Permanent. Like God. I knelt in the darkness, clutching the root, and started to beat my forehead against it. Again and again till it hurt. Feeling the pain seemed important. It gave strength to my prayer: 'Please, please save my mother! Make her live! Make her live!' I was crying and the tears splashed my hand and wet the root. It was the taste of salt, I think, that brought me to my senses.

I was sobbing when I looked back towards the house. I could see my father pacing the kitchen and I suddenly realised he depended on me. I had to act like a grown-up. Wiping the tears aside with the back of my hand, I walked to the orchard gate, trying not to see the shadows that loomed around me. The lantern was on the ground as I struggled with the latch and I suddenly caught sight of the giant shadow I cast. It terrified me. My mind didn't register it was my own shadow. It was a moving monster . . . tall and fearsome!

Then began the long spooky walk through the orchard. Dark trees on one side, high bladey grass on the other . . . and the shadow-giant prowling beside me. Sometimes behind. Sometimes in front. The swinging lantern made the orange tree leaves shine like peering eyes and awoke shadowy forms behind each tree as I passed. The deep grass rustled in the night breeze. I remembered the crocodile from Peter Pan and started to run. The more I ran, the more frightened I became. The crocodile was joined by my wild tiger! They stalked me on one side while the shadow-giants loomed and leapt at me on the other. My fear was so overwhelming I knew I had to 'pull myself together'. My mother's words. So I tried to collect my body and my fear into one tight core . . . to be 'grown-up'. It worked if I shut my eyes very tight and if I shut my hearing

off. I tried very hard. But of course, with my eyes shut, I stumbled.

The minute I opened my eyes, all the fears returned, and I ran as though my life depended on it.

The lantern swung in gigantic arcs and the shadow-monsters danced in bigger leaps. There seemed to be two behind each tree! Fear was in my very veins! My legs felt as though they were made of water. I could hardly breathe. I had to force myself to keep running. I wanted to stop and dig myself into the earth. Who knows the animal fears of childhood? The panic of survival.

I ran and ran through hours of fear. It was only a quarter of a mile, but it seemed forever. Finally through the trees I saw the orange glow of the Morgans' farmhouse. Safety! Only the stile to climb and I'd be there! The message? The message? Why was I here? The doctor! Yes, of course, the doctor! I grabbed the stile and put the lantern on the top step. Then suddenly a real monster attacked me!

He was big and black and flew through the air. Barking and growling with big white fangs! I was knocked to the ground. The monster grabbed my arm and shook me ferociously. I couldn't escape. I rolled my face into the earth, and screamed. My arm was being mauled, and it shook my whole body.

Suddenly bright torch light froze the whole scene. The dog went still. A man's voice shouted and he let go of my arm. I lay very still. I knew I was free. Saved! Uncle Arnold picked me up and lifted me on to his shoulder. The warm sweaty smell of him brought me back to the reality. I sobbed into the secure curve of his neck. 'The doctor! You've got to get the doctor!' I cried.

Beyond that I remember nothing but the warmth and brightness of the Morgans' kitchen. Briefly. I can't remember where I slept. I don't remember going home. I don't remember seeing the doctor.

Later when I was a teenager, my mother told me her side of the story. She had been very near death that night, and the doctor stayed with her till dawn. At times he thought she had gone.

'It was as if I was floating above the house. I could see myself lying on the settee . . . and you and your father . . . as if we were all toy people in a shoe box. Very small and far below.



'I knew you couldn't look after yourselves. . . '

And I *knew* you couldn't look after yourselves. You both needed so much caring and love. I told "them" you needed me. I must go back. I pleaded and argued and finally "they" agreed. Then I gradually floated down . . . like a kite being pulled back by a string . . . closer and closer . . . until I was inside myself again . . . lying on the settee . . . and I felt my cold hand in Malcolm's warm one.'

The Bunyip

There was a night, as we sat around the kitchen fire, that the air echoed with a deep mournful cry. A sort of thumping lonely sound. It came from the swamp, far away across the paddocks, and sounded like the cry of a big animal.

My father opened the door, and went out into the darkness of the veranda. The sound came again. Reverberating through the air . . . eerily . . . swamping the kitchen with its sadness.

'For heaven's sake, come in and shut the door, Malcolm', called my mother.

'I wonder what it is, May? In all my time, I've never neard anything like it!'

The anguished cry roared again. It had a strange deep booming quality.

'It sounds like a sea-lion . . . but that's impossible', said my father, scanning the shelves for his natural history book, circa 1880. '. . . and do you notice there's no sound of frogs in the swamp?'

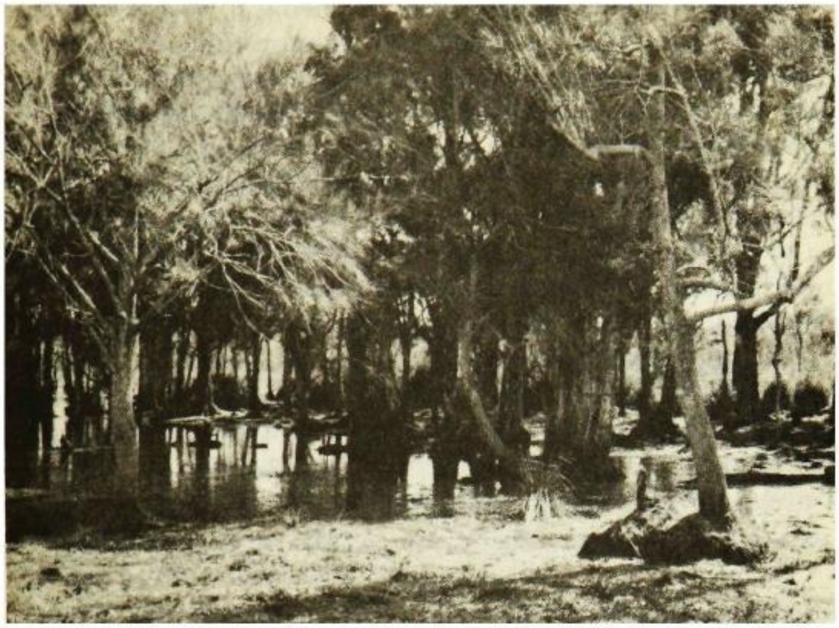
'Perhaps it's a bunyip', I suggested.

'Let's just lock the doors and go to bed', added my mother peevishly.

'The child can sleep with us . . . and the dog can come inside as a special.'

Jack had started howling outside, and we could hear answering howls from other dogs on other farms. It was all rather unnerving, as the weird, lonesome cries pierced the dark night, hour after hour.

Next morning everyone was astir. They had all heard it and they came to discuss their fears. Even people as far away as Dora Creek village had heard the chilling sounds. Someone suggested it was marsh-gas exploding. The Tilses and the Shawnessys, who lived closest to the swamp, insisted it was a bunyip. Mr Tilse confirmed it, because he'd heard a bunyip as



After a night of Bunyip cries, the swamp looked eerie and frightening.

a young lad. This was exactly the same. My father said that, although it *sounded* like a sea-lion, it was perhaps a dugong. Mr Morgan said he's seen a pair of muscovy ducks on the swamp and it was probably them. But nobody knew the mating-call of a muscovy duck, so nobody could be sure. Besides, the sound certainly sounded as if it came from a *very* large deep-chested animal.

The following night, several hours after dusk, the air shivered and trembled with the mournful cries again. It was eerie and frightening. We could trace the movement of the sound from one end of the swamp to the other. The dogs still kept up their howling through the night.

Next day, the men met at the edge of the swamp, with guns. They walked all round the edge to look for footprints or slithers in the mud. Nothing. Whatever it was, it was lurking in the depths, way out in the middle. They shot off their guns to disturb it. Arnold Morgan's two muscovy ducks flurried off in a long slow take-off. Running along the water, then finally getting airborn with great effort and flapping of wings.

'Well, that's that. You see it wasn't a bunyip after all!' said Arnold smugly.

That evening we settled down, knowing it would be a quiet night. The problem had gone. But right on time, the deep fog-horn cries started again. Hour after hour they went. The sound wavered to a deep pitch that seemed to vibrate the very timbers of the house. All the dogs set up their far-flung circle of howls. The bunyip legend crept into everyone's mind. Doubts and fears drowned cool twentieth-century logic. There was nothing to see in the daylight. Only those dreadful, mournful calls at night. Loud. Of solid flesh. Moving slowly through the mile of slush and rushes. The swamp was host to 'something' for five nights, and then it moved on.

Of course I *knew* it was a bunyip. Giant, sluggish, scaly . . . with one huge muddy eye . . . crying because it was the last of the lonely creatures on earth. In my heart I loved it with a sad compassion. But I was very relieved when it went.

Country Kitchen

My first memory of the kitchen is bath-time . . . after the evening meal. We had a bathroom, but my special bath was an oval iron tub, with handles at each end. Every evening it was plopped down, in front of the wood stove. While my mother undressed me (playing skin-a-rabbit) in the warm cosy kitchen, my father poured saucepans of boiling water from the stove. Then cold water from the tap was added, until he announced: 'Pop her in now. The water's just right.'

After I was soaped down . . . with a washer and Sunlight soap . . . standing up . . . it was slip and splash time. My mother and I blew bubbles, sudsing the soap in our hands, until we could get a rainbow bubble-screen in the circle made with thumb and forefinger. Carefully, softly, puffing and blowing, the screen would billow out into a huge bubble-balloon. The trick was to toss it in the air and keep it aloft by blowing. Glorious fun! My father cheered when we got one aloft. When the bubble burst, our faces were splashed with cold.

The big, white bath-towel was warmed by my father. Crispy hot on the side closest to the fire, it was the sensuous lure to get me to jump out. Have you ever been swaddled and loved in a hot towel . . . head to toe . . . picked up and kissed? Then swirled round the kitchen in a wild dance? By the only man you really loved and trusted? What a wonderful way to end the day.

My second kitchen-memory is biscuits. I was well below table-height, where they were being made. My grandmother, in dark-print blouse with high-necked lacy bib, smiled down at me. I stood close to her long grey skirt and grabbed the ribbons of her starchy white apron when she checked the oven. We played horses while the biscuits were cooking, she sat on the sofa and made me ride her foot. She wore boots that buttoned up the side. 'Ride a cock horse to Banbury Cross and see a fine

lady upon a white horse!' we sang. And another one: 'Jig-a-jog, jig-a-jog, ride a fat pony... Put a feather in his hat and call him Macaroni!'

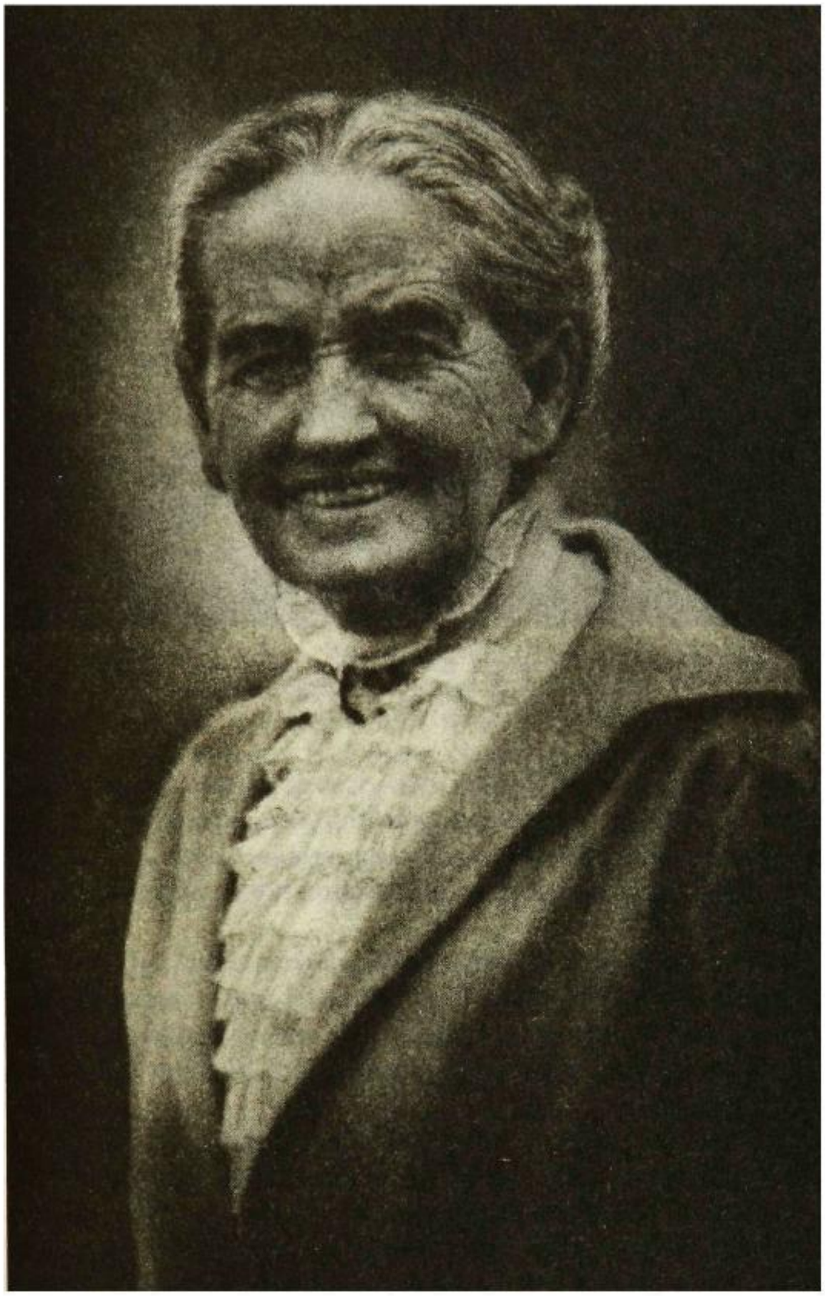
The biscuits were *especially* for me. We'd get up often and peep into the oven. A hot nutty smell would waft out and make my mouth water. 'They're nearly ready!' she'd say, fanning her hot cheeks. 'We'll get the cake-rack ready to cool them.'

With pot-holders, she'd carefully lift out the hot metal tray. The biscuits, crisp and spicy, lay in neat rows, just kissing each other. The sheet of buttered brown-paper they'd been cooked on, was darkly singed at the edges. She'd slide the paper, biscuits and all, onto the cake-rack. 'Now we'll make a cup of tea and they'll be cool enough for you to have one. As a special, I'll even let you dip one in your tea. But don't tell anyone. It's very rude. Not done in the best society!'

I loved her dearly. We had little secrets from the grown-ups and she told me fantastic adventures of her own childhood. In 1850, she had sailed from Ireland in a real four-masted sailing ship. And she had stories of a far distant ancestor who remembered the Battle of the Boyne. She was grinding corn, when she heard dreadful sounds of fighting and soldiers galloping on horseback. So she scooped the grits into her apron, grabbed her little girl and ran with her on her hip. They hid under the high banks of the river for a day and a night. And lived off the corn, soaked in water.

My grandmother was born an Alcorn. 'We got our name from the King himself. King Charles the first.' The family's name was Robertson then, and they lived in Scotland. They were farmers and they grew corn. Well this day the King rode up with all his soldiers and their horses. They billeted themselves on the farm, took over the house and the barns ... and our family had to feed about two hundred men and animals. And there was only corn. The King had sweet corn for lunch, corn bread for dinner and corn-porridge for breakfast! The soldiers had the same. And the horses ate bags and bags of corn. When they finally left, the King thanked them for their help, but with a wry smile said that in future they should be known as Alcorn ... not Robertson.

When you love someone as I loved my Grandmother, you want to bestow gifts upon them. So I made her a multitude of paper swords. It was my only skill at that age. They were care-



My grandmother, in a high-necked lacy blouse, smiled down at me.



Grandmother told us wonderful stories. She'd sailed out in a four-master from Ireland in 1856.

fully, tightly rolled from a broadsheet of the *Sydney Morning Herald* . . . diagonally. The top section was pinned over to form the hand-guard. She seemed to appreciate them and we often played exciting duels round the kitchen table, while the biscuits cooked.

Grandma died in Sydney, when I was about six. Although I wasn't allowed to go to her funeral, I was assured she went to her maker gloriously armed with one of my paper swords. I'm sure she would have easily convinced St Peter of her territorial rights.

Country kitchens, with a fire in the grate, are the heart of family living. The place of the loving coming-together every day. The place where Grace is said . . . where news is shared . . . where problems are discussed. My mother's sickness seemed centered in the kitchen. She always had her 'willies' on the sofa. She took her medicine for pernicious anaemia in the kitchen. The only treatment in those days was raw liver!

I remember the evening my father came in with a fresh, warm calf's liver on a plate. He'd just killed my friend Peter.

We'd heard the shot an hour before, and were desperately trying to think about something else. The liver was a quivering purple-red mass, still warm. My mother took one look at it and nearly threw-up.

'But you *must* try to eat it, May. The doctor says it's the *only* thing', my father said gently.

'Malcolm, I *couldn't*! Not raw! Not Peter's!'

'Come on, try some. I'll eat it with you my dear.'

He drew the kitchen knife from its scabbard and cut a sliver off the edge. We watched appalled as he put it in his mouth and chewed it up.

'Really, my dear, it doesn't taste bad at all. It's nice . . . if you don't *think* about it.'

'I couldn't! It *looks* so dreadful!'

'Well, you must just close your eyes. Bab, will you show your mother how nice it is?' He gave me a special look.

I gulped and nodded. I'd do *anything* for him . . . if it was *really* necessary. *This* was. I knew.

He cut a slice for me, the blood still oozing. It was dropped in my mouth, like a baby bird being fed. I swallowed it whole.

'Oh, Muvver, it really tastes lovely!' I lied.

What could she do? She ate a cupful of chopped raw liver that night . . . next morning . . . midday and night . . . until the ghastly stuff was eaten. Who knows? It may have worked. She was one of the rare people who recovered from pernicious anaemia. Her records were on file at St Vincent's Hospital till the 1950s.

Perhaps the most delightful liver episode happened when my father brought in a rooster's liver. Again, fresh from it's late owner! He left the kitchen to finish the 'pulling'. My mother thought she'd cheat a little, and lightly fry it. However the liver dropped on the top of the stove, instead of into the pan. And she never caught it. It sizzled and popped . . . and hopped! Every time it landed, it hopped again. The little air pockets exploding. She chased that blessed liver all over the stove top. And every time it popped, it got smaller. Hopping and popping. Smaller and smaller. Until she was chasing a square inch . . . a half-inch . . . a faster and faster, high hopping speck of chicken liver through the ash at the back of the stove. That was one chicken liver that didn't help her. Unless laughter is a good prescription.

Explosions! I remember the glorious time mother's yeast exploded. It all started when the Russells picked up their and our regular bread from Mr Lean, the Morisset baker. It was usually delivered in Lean's bread cart, and left in our bread box that was nailed to a gum tree on the opposite river bank.

However, the day came in 1931 when someone saw how the bread was made. Mr Lean had a bad cold. He sneezed lavishly, wiped his nose with his floury hand . . . and went on kneading the bread! Suddenly bread deliveries were cancelled, and all our local Dora Creek housewives took to baking their own. It wasn't easy to buy fertile packaged yeast, so the potato-yeast cult started.

Someone in Martinsville had potato-yeast and gave a little 'starter' to Aunty Alice. And so it spread. All you needed was a brown beer bottle and a cupful of 'starter'. Then you just added the water from boiled potatoes . . . at blood heat.

There was only one problem. When summer came, the yeast went mad. It grew. It bubbled. It filled the beer bottle, tightly corked, with impossible stress. Either the cork whammed out, like a cannon ball, and the ceiling and walls were sprayed with a fountain of smelly yeast . . . or the bottle exploded! Flying glass and yeast everywhere. Bread-making certainly had its hazards. But amid the chaos, my mother was always trying to save a little of the 'starter'. Scooping it up off the floor with a spoon . . . searching for another suitable bottle . . . and the vital cork. Corks were always on the short list.

Bread-making didn't come easily to my mother. She was city-born and a society dressmaker by trade. (Countess Freehill and the Whites of Belltrees, Scone, were clients. Photos of little Patrick White in a bunny costume were in her memory box.) Cooking wasn't really her strong point. *The Commonsense Cook Book* was her Bible, and even then she sometimes missed the vital point.

She tried her first bread about three weeks after a volcano blew out of a plain in Mexico. Popocatépetl, I think was the name. Anyway, my father being of a scientific and geological turn of mind, was enthralled with the idea of a volcano popping up from the absolute flat of some Mexican farmer's orange orchard.

So against this scene, my mother, trying to impress her recently acquired pioneer relatives, attempted bread. She sifted

the flour and added the yeast. She read the recipe again. 'Pour on the warm water and knead.' She took the water from the boiling kettle. Then kneaded manfully for ages. 'Now leave the dough to rise in a warm place', said the good book. She put it in a tin at the back of the stove, and added wood to the fire to heat the oven. She checked the dough after thirty minutes . . . after an hour. Flat as a pancake! She looked two hours later. Dead as a door-nail! She checked the recipe and realised the boiling water had killed the yeast-bugs. Not to be caught out as a failure, she wrapped the heavy dough in newspaper and buried it in the orchard. Down about the middle, where the ploughing had already been done.

Well, several weeks went by and my father noticed a slight mound rising in *his* orchard. There were no warning tremors, but he was fascinated to watch the birth of *his* volcano. He didn't want to worry his new bride, so he never mentioned it. But every morning on his way to milk the cows, and every evening after work, he'd stroll down to the McDonald volcano. Sure enough, every day it rose a few inches. The earth about two feet around started to crack, and the mound got bigger. Bigger every day! His excitement was intense.

Then one night it rained. A really good down-pour. And next morning my father saw the core of his volcano. White! With black letters 'orning Hera' on the top! He kicked it with his foot. Nothing exploded. No lava. No flames. No ashes. Just a doughy mass. He strolled home, rather disappointed. 'You didn't tell me you tried to make bread, May', was all he said.

When the August westerlies blew, it was the curtain-raiser for apple jelly time. Little blush-pink and green 'windfalls' dropped from the trees. My mother and I would go out with the big wicker wash-basket to gather them off the ground. When the basket was piled high my father would carry it home and plop it on the bathroom veranda. There we'd sit in the afternoon sun, washing them. We'd fill kerosene-tin buckets and stir them thoroughly, through one wash after another . . . until all the spray was washed off.

Then as the sun got lower, my mother would chop the small apples into quarters, and I would drop them into a fresh kerosene-tin of water. They had to soak overnight.

Next morning the fire would be lit . . . and a big pile of wood chopped and brought in. Ready for the long day's jam making.

About three kerosene-tins would be set to simmer. My mother stirring them regularly with her long wooden jam stick. It came out dripping pink, syrupy juice, which my mother tasted with her finger. It was tart and she'd screw up her face as she murmured, 'M-m-m-m . . . that's all right. I think it'll set.'

By night-fall the apples would be cooked to a hot sodden mess. Then the fire would be stoked up, and the sugar added. It had been sitting in pans in the oven to warm. My father and mother stirred the tins and moved them so they didn't boil over. I was never allowed off the sofa, because they said it was dangerous.

'Barbara, you *must* stay where you are. Your Uncle Russ' brother pulled a saucepan of jam over himself when he was a little boy . . . and look where *he* is!'

We all knew he'd been in Morisset Asylum for the past thirty years. It was a lesson in life for all subsequent parents.

The kitchen would be filled with the rich, fruity smell of apples, wafted on clouds of steam. By lamplight, the steam glowed in a golden haze against the dark corners. By the stove, my mother would ladle a spoonful of juice onto a saucer and let it cool on the table. She tested saucer after saucer. When it finally formed a 'skin', the jam was cooked. And the jelly-making commenced.

My father went to the shed and brought in the frame. He'd made it years before from wire and wood. It had four tall legs that fitted neatly over a big enamel dish.

The top circle of the frame was designed to hold a pillow-case, point downwards. My mother shook out the freshly washed linen, and pegged it securely into position. With a mouthful of big safety-pins, she pinned the pillow-case between the pegs. All was ready. The big blue-and-white striped milk jug was waiting on the table. Great jugfuls of the apple-mess would be poured into the pillowcase. The linen changed from white to oozie-pink . . . and then the drips started. Plop, plop, plop . . . into the white enamel dish. It took all night to filter through. Before it cooled, my mother poured it cup by cup into her jelly jars. It tooks hours to set solid, sparkling like ruby crystal, so firm you could tip the jar upside down.

While it was setting, we took down the big scissors and cut squares of fine white paper, and lengths of string. A basin of egg-whites was forked into clear liquid, thick and runny. Then

the squares of paper were dipped in and slapped deftly on the top of each jar. I squeezed them over the rim tightly, while my mother tied the strings. When the paper dried, each jar was neatly labelled APPLE JELLY: AUGUST '32. (An historic vintage year, that was. We went to Sydney by train to see the Harbour Bridge opened.)

That night, when my father came in from the paddock, half the table would be lined up with jars of jelly. For his approval. Then we'd sit down to Apple-jelly-time tea. Scrambled egg-yolks cooked with cream and parsley, and served on big slices of toast. To be followed by apple sago that was made from stewed apple from the pillow-case. It was a happy, cosy tea-time . . . and the kitchen was still perfumed with apples.

Our kitchen was a place where people dropped in. Not proper invited visitors who came for afternoon tea and cake. They were shown into the sitting room. But friends and relatives, on their way 'to' or 'from' Dora Creek or Avondale . . . or even Sydney. There were our cousins, the Currans: mother, father and a multitude of daughters. Two in that family stood out.

Uncle Frank used to thump in on his wooden leg, stiff and heavy. He'd wearily heave himself down into the big chair, holding firmly to the arms and letting his leg down carefully.

'How's the lemons, May? Ours are doing very nicely, I'm glad to say. Yes, I will have a cuppa tea, thank you.'

His script was always perfect. So predestined, that I finally added 'Uncle Frank' to the games I played with my mother. 'How's the lemons, May?' I'd say as I stumped in with one small leg stiffly held, and supported painfully with my right hand. I'd lift it from under the knee as I sat down. My face would twist into a wince. 'Ours are doing very nicely', I'd say in a deep voice. There was no malice. Only a re-living. A sort of inner understanding.

In the same family, among all the girls . . . actually the prettiest of them all . . . was Vera. Vera was deaf since birth. She had no control over her vocal chords and she made animal sounds. So she was considered dumb . . . although her eyes danced and smiled and she lip-read and understood everything that was going on. Her family spoke to her with their fingers, in flashing gestures. I dearly wanted to talk to her.

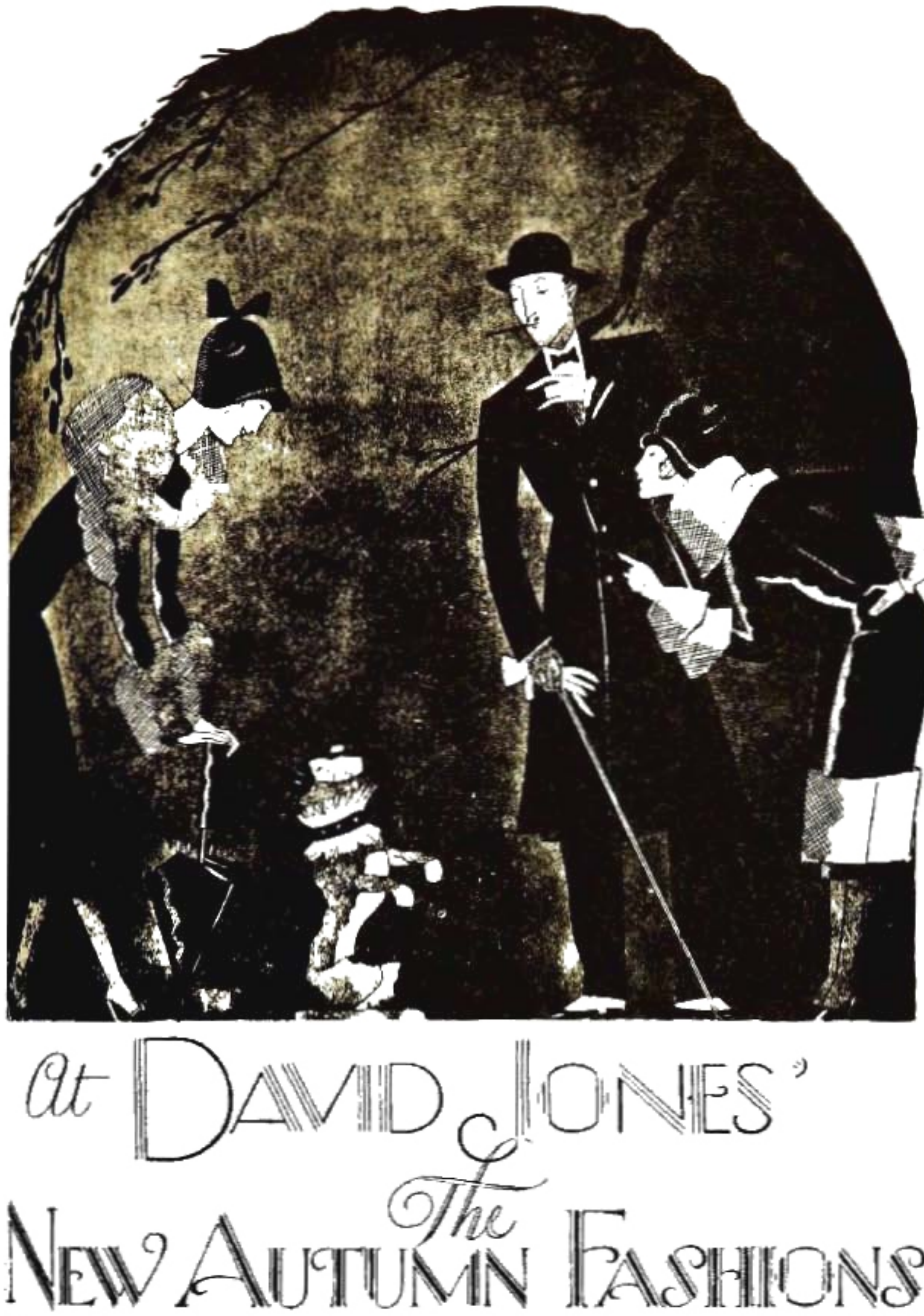
They translated for me, but she laughed so much, I felt they

were embroidering . . . or worse still . . . talking behind my back, as it were. So I asked Madge, her youngest sister, to teach me the sign language. She stayed with us several weekends, until I'd got the hang of it. That was easy. But of course, at six, my spelling made translation difficult. I loved to see Vera walking across the paddocks and always ran to meet her. She was very grown-up. About fourteen or fifteen, I guess. To me, she looked like a princess with dark wavy hair. Her eyes were big and brown and very expressive. She seemed so romantic . . . wistful . . . imprisoned in her own silent tower. She became my heroine, and I decided to give up speaking . . . like Vera.

Sign language only! It must have been very trying for my parents, because I shut my ears to their talk. By pretending, I literally *couldn't* hear them. I remember tugging at my mother's sleeve while she was getting tea. With finger talk, I announced that I was now Judith. Barbara had gone.

The appalling situation lasted over two weeks. It covered an embarrassing trip to Dora Creek and Mr Harpur's dead animal collection . . . Sabbath School at Avondale with Mr Uttley . . . and a visit from Molly Russell, who couldn't understand sign language. She, being a peer, thought I'd turned into a silly galoot. And told me so. So after a night thinking about it, I decided to wake up as Barbara. Judith had played her part.

Other kitchen visitors turned up after dark, on exciting Friday nights. They arrived in 'Luto', my Uncle Les' shiny black 1926 Buick automobile . . . all the way from Sydney. Various other pretend-uncles, my godmother Aunty Max and other chic ladies in fox furs, cloche hats, short skirts, pink silk stockings and wicked strappy shoes came for weekends. They were gay and noisy . . . the very first advertising career-girls Australia had seen. The kitchen whooped with laughter and strange slang. The air was heady with perfume. Their fingernails were bright red. So were their lips. And it stuck to my cheek when they kissed me. It was rather like being invaded. I was none too sure if everything they brought into the house was safe. When I went to climb into bed, there was a long furry animal that smelt strange, and whose yellow eyes glowered at me in the lamp-light. I rushed back into the safety of the kitchen. 'Oh, you silly little chickadee. It's only my silver fox, darling! Come on. Let's go in and *you* can wear it!' Molly



They arrived on a Friday night—chic ladies in fox furs and cloche hats who could have walked straight out of Aunty Max's latest David Jones advertisement.

Devitt, ad-lady of Farmers, smothered me in my first fur, dabbed me lavishly with perfume, and made me parade on the kitchen table.

Uncle Les brought in his portable gramophone. It was black leather and opened up to show dark red inside, with a big silver arm with something like a clock on top. That was where the needle went. And out came the records. With a picture of Jack our dog, on each one. Music! I thought music only came from the piano ... or, lately, from the wireless. Uncle Les put a handle into the side of the box and wound it up. The music was strange and raucous. They danced the charleston. Molly Devitt did it on the kitchen table. The Roaring Twenties had come to our kitchen. They got my mother and father doing the Foxtrot, and sang things like 'Tip-toe Through the Tulips' and 'Why do some girls look so sweet, When they're walking down the street? It's a precious little thing called Love.'

I was finally tucked into bed with the fox as well as my Teddy bear. And I drifted off to sleep, enveloped in the gaiety, the music and the musky smell of the fur.

Tales from my Grandmother

When you are little, the most wonderful thing is to discover the oldest person you know was once a child, too . . . and to hear the things *they* did when they were your age. My grandmother was born in 1850, and when she was six she left Ireland with her family, to sail right around the world. There had been a potato famine in northern Ireland, and most of the families of Alcorn left Omagh to find new lives in America or Australia.

The family was booked on the good ship *Pedestrian*. She was a four-masted sailing vessel, that had fought as one of Nelson's battleships. Guns were still lined up below-decks, in front of their port-holes. But now the *Pedestrian* was doing merchant and passenger service from Liverpool to Sydney, via Cape Town. She took only twenty-one passengers. That was usually two families. Only four adults and a 'lot of children . . . but of course some were almost grown-up'. Grandma's sisters were about sixteen and seventeen.

The ship was due to sail in early October. So they packed up and left the farm mid-September 1856. Everything went by horse and cart to catch the boat for England. There were piles and piles of crates and baggage. When they finally arrived on the wharf at Liverpool, the captain said he'd probably sail on the morrow. But every day, it was 'tomorrow!' First the cargo hadn't arrived. Then the weather was too bad. Those 'tomorrows' went on for three months! The family lived in cramped rooms on the water-front. Their money dwindled. It was noisy and exciting. There were lots of fights in the street, when the sailors got drunk. Very often the parents wished they'd stayed in Ireland. But the children loved it.

The bad autumn gales of '56 abated and finally they set sail late in December. The anchors were weighed with a great clanking of chains. Men had a big cartwheel thing, like a revolving table on the deck. They sang as they pushed it round

and wound up the anchor chain. Then the sails were unfurled. The crew did a lot of shouting and running . . . and suddenly my grandmother said they could feel the ship go 'light'. Like a bird skimming over the water. The ship fairly danced. Water creamed alongside, and trailed in two white ribbons behind.

After waiting all that time, the day the *Pedestrian* sailed was probably the worst the captain could have chosen. Less than twenty-four hours after losing sight of land, a furious storm blew up. The ship was tossed and buffeted by huge waves. All the women and children were ordered below, and got very seasick. The smell was dreadful as the companionways were battened down and the portholes shut. Days and nights passed in dread anxiety. There was no fresh air and children cried all the time.

The menfolk stayed on deck to help the crew. When the storm was at its height the ship was shaken from stem to stern by a terrific impact. The captain thought they'd hit a rock. But one of the old cannons had come adrift and fallen overboard . . . tearing a big hole in the side of the ship. Fortunately it was above the water-line, but even so a lot of water was shipped. It sloshed all over the cabin floors and wet everyone's clothes. In those days all women wore long frocks of heavy woollen serge . . . even the children.

There were two carpenters on board and they were ordered over the side in the middle of the storm. Lashed with ropes, they worked like demons to nail planks over that hole. The wind was shrieking in the rigging and huge waves swept down the side of the ship as they worked.

After the storm passed the Alcorn family enjoyed days of sunshine and calm waters. As they sailed down the coast of Africa it got very hot and the children played all sorts of games on deck . . . hide-and-seek . . . tag. But they had to be careful because the deck was always sloping under sail. It was peaceful for the passengers but less so with the crew.

Mutiny was afoot. One of the passengers made great friends with the captain and learnt as much navigation as he could. He also had friends among the crew, particularly the old sail-maker. They planned to kill the captain and the mate and throw them overboard. Then they were going to rob the passengers and dump them somewhere on the coast of Guinea . . . excepting the pretty teenage girls.

Fortunately the twelve-year-old cabin boy warned the captain and the ring leaders were put in irons for the rest of the journey. So the men passengers again had to help the crew on deck. They were never asked to climb the rigging or furl the sails, however. That would have been too dangerous.

'Old Sails', one of the mutineers, had a grizzly beard and a wooden leg. As well, he had a wonderful fund of stories about the sea. When they brought him up on deck with his ball and chain the children would sit around and listen, enthralled. Finally 'Sails' spent the whole day on deck, just to keep the children quiet. He was hanged with the others when they docked at Sydney Cove.

There were weeks and weeks of monotonous sailing, right down the coast of Africa, with no land in sight. Then one evening, in the gathering dusk, a ship was sighted. Way out on the far horizon. When morning broke, the ship was still in sight ... a little nearer and following course. Two or three days passed like this, with the strange ship never varying her speed or distance. Captain Sydney became suspicious. In the 1850s, pirates still roamed the seas. Especially down the long coast of Africa. Some were slavers heading for America.

The Captain decided that this was indeed a pirate ship. So once more all the children were ordered below decks. They watched through the portholes. The women donned men's clothing and joined the men on deck, so it looked like a fair-sized crew. The canon on board were uncovered and several fired. Then the *Pedestrian* swung round and made after the intruder. She still had the lines of a man-o-war and the ruse worked. It was indeed a pirate ship, and a very fast one ... she headed off over the horizon when they gave chase.

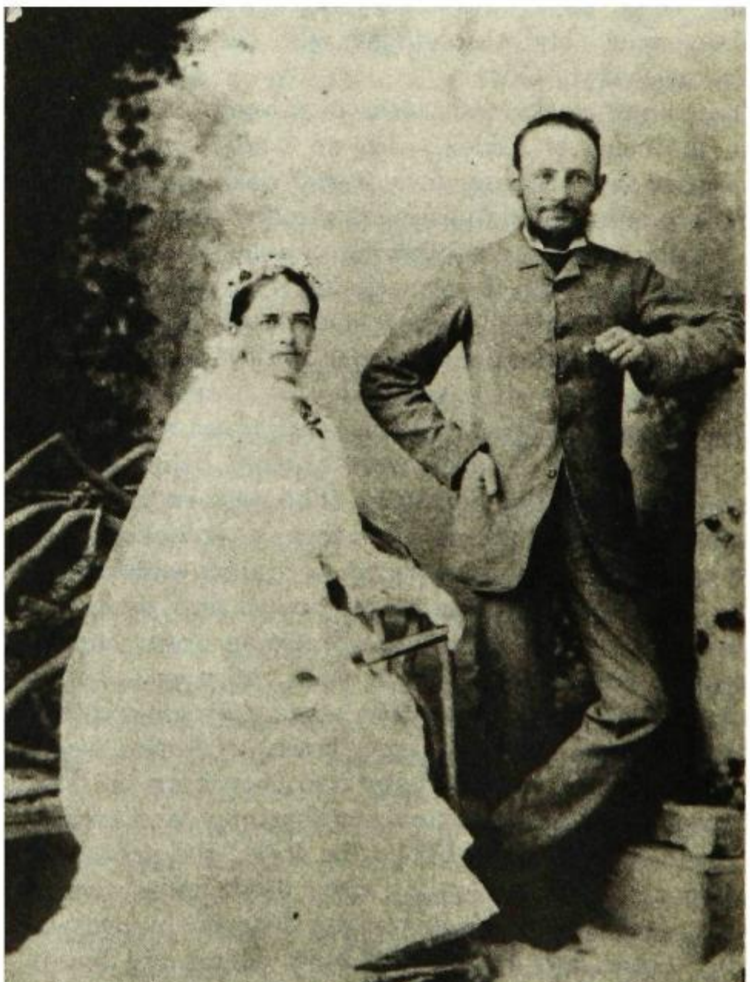
The *Pedestrian* reached Cape Town seventeen weeks after leaving Liverpool. A new baby had been born on board and toddlers like Charlotte Alcorn had forgotten land even existed. She cried when they put her on the dock: 'I'm not above decks ... I'm not below decks ... and I don't know where I are!' It was a feeling shared, in varying degrees, by everyone.

After Cape Town the wind blew strong and steady. The roaring forties headed them eastwards on the last safe leg.

Like most Australia-bound ships in those days, the *Pedestrian* carried a cargo of wheat in her hold. When wheat gets damp is can cause spontaneous combustion. With the first whiff of

smoke the crew started shovelling down in the hold. They quickly found the fire, nicely alight and next to a partition separating cargo from ammunition and gun-powder! A lifeboat was lowered and the women and children set adrift with one man to row. The rest stayed aboard to man the pumps and pass endless buckets of water down to the blaze. Finally the fire was extinguished and the sodden wheat dumped overboard.

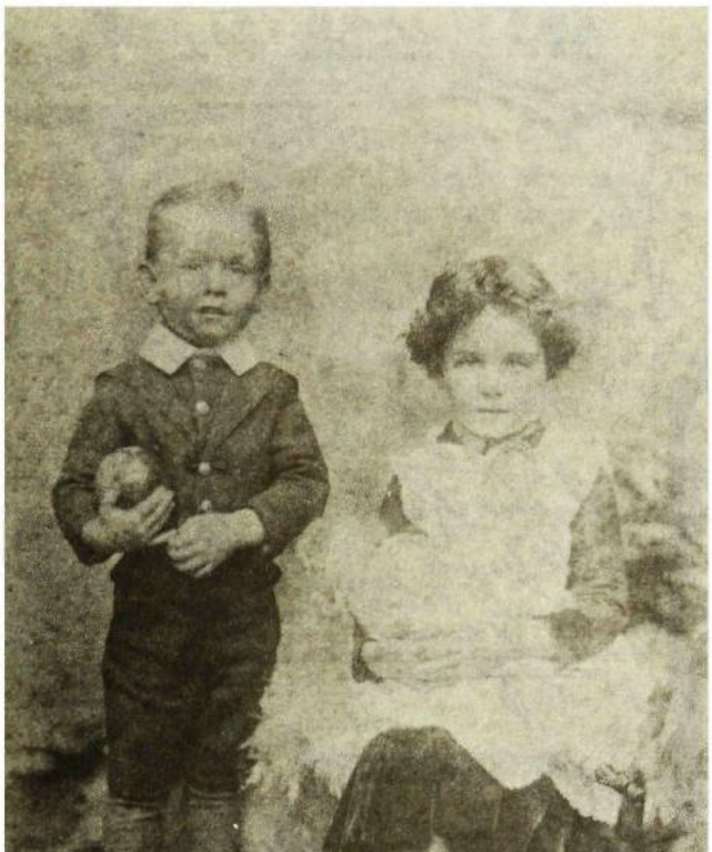
The trip took just on seven months.



'If I hadn't married Roderick McDonald. . .'

'That's how I got to Australia when I was just a year older than you', said my grandmother. 'And that's how I happened to be *your* grandmother. Because if I hadn't come here and married Roderick McDonald, I wouldn't have had your father as a son . . . and he wouldn't have had *you*!'

It gave me a nice feeling of 'belonging' in some giant and mighty plan.



'. . . I wouldn't have had your father as a son. . .'


Roderick McDonald Esq.
Master Rodk McDonald
Numba School
January
1858
Master Rodk
McDonald
Numba School
January
1858
W. Banks Engraver & Lithographer Edinburgh

The Schooldays of Roderick

In 1858, just one year after my grandmother arrived in Australia, the little boy who was to be her husband was going to school at Numba in the Shoalhaven district of New South Wales.

He was ten years old. His name was Roderick McDonald, and he had a sister Ann and a brother Malcolm. They had emigrated from northern Scotland with their parents, a few years previously.

We still have his school-book, carefully written in ink and dated 1858. Reading the sums, it's like a glimpse into a totally different world filled with weights and measures that were totally forgotten in less than one hundred years. What a litany:

Stones of flax
Firkins of butter
Hogsheads of tobacco
Nails of cloth
Ells of drugget
Frails of raisins
Bolls of wheat
Gallons of whisky
Pecks of barley
Loads and trusses of hay!

Bills of Parcles

A Hosier's Bill

Mr John Grant

Bought of James Brow

1858
Jan 4th

Item	Rate	Amount
8 pair worsted stockings at	2/6	1.0.0
9 pair thread ditto at	3/1	1.7.9
7 pair silk ditto at	12.10½	4.10.1½
10 pair cotton ditto at	5.8¾	2.17.3½
4 pair hose at	1.9	0 7 0
		10.2.20

A Stationes Bill

Mr George Young

Bought of David Sc

1858
November 3rd

Item	Rate	Amount
20 reams post paper at	1.1.0	21.0.0
18 reams foolscap at	0 14 6	13.1.0
24 reams printing demy at	1 8 10	22.12.0
30 reams royal at	2 4 2	66.5.0
6 reams cartridge at	0 12	3.16 0
4 cwt pastebord at	17 6½	3.10 2
		130.6.2

Simple

Teaches from three given numbers to find a fourth of the three given nubers tow are awlways of the same kind the other is of the same kind as the fourth or the number required in the question

Rule First

Put down that number which is of the same kind with the number required for the third term

Rule Second

Consider whether the answer ought to be greater or less than this number if greater make the greater of the two remaining nubers the second term and the less the first but if less make the less of the two remaining numbers the secon^d^ and the greater the first term

Rule Third

If the first and second terms are of different denominations reduce them to the same and the third to the lowest denomination mentioned in it

Rule Fourth

Multiply the second and third terms together and divide their product by the first the quotient

carried forward

Tare and Tret

In 17 frails of raisins each weighing 5 cwt 2 qr 5 lbs gross tare 2 3 lbs per frail how much neat wei^ght^

2 3	5 . 2 5	5 . 2 . 5
7 . 4	7	2 3
28) 1 6 . 1 (5	3 8 . 3 . 7	5 . 1 10
1 4 0 . 1 1	1 . 1 21	7
2 1	37 . 1 14	37 . 1 . 14

What is the neat weight of 1 8 butts of currants each 8 cwt 2 qrs 5 lbs tare at 1 4 lbs per cwt

8 . 2 5
9 x 2 = 1 8
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The Year of the Pig

With the coming of the Depression years came the pigs. My father was the first farmer in the area, to realise that if fruit was being dumped in Sydney, it could be converted into roast pork dinners in the country. Better and cheaper than the local meat from Tafe the butcher. 'Tough as Tafe's steak' was a local saying, and it described the times.

Being a cautious man, my father decided to test his 'pig theory' in a small way. Two to start. There were no pigs in the district, so he wrote away and ordered the piglets to be delivered by rail. Then the sty had to be built.

We harnessed Old Dick to the sledge, and headed off into the bush with the axe. My father leading the horse while I rode in state with the axe and rope. Jack, the dog, followed at a trot. We went over the smooth paddocks, pausing at the gates. It was my job to close them, and I had to jump back on the moving sledge. Finally we arrived at the edge of the bush and followed the rough track to where the gum trees were tall and strong. Dick was hitched to a log where the grass was long and sweet, and he'd be happy. Then my father, axe over his shoulder, prowled around and marked the trees to be felled.

For me it was a brand new experience to see the trees come crashing down. For hours the bush rang and echoed with axe-blows and the screech of startled birds, as the trees toppled with a great swoosh and crash. Dust and insects rose in clouds, then settled in the slanting sunlight. After the tops and branches were stripped off, they were chopped into eight-foot lengths. Big solid logs, smelling richly of new sap. Some bleeding bright scarlet like wounded animals. These were the blood-woods. I waited for the drips of sap to dry, and collected a pocketful of brilliant ruby beads.

At last the sledge was piled high, the logs lashed tightly, and we set off for home. Old Dick strained against his collar to get

started. My father led the way, shouldering the axe. Old Dick followed, his reins looped back over the collar. I lagged behind, picking wild violets and buttercups that bloomed in sedgy patches near the edge of the swamp. The dog took time off for exciting detours to scuffle and snuffle into rabbit holes. All in all it was a very satisfying day.

Early next morning, the sty was laid out with pegs and string. The hole digging began. As each post was erected and tamped firmly into place, my father stopped to mop the sweat from his forehead. It was heavy work and he sent me home to get a billy of tea.

Days went by and eventually the sty was finished, with posts and rails closely, ruggedly interlocked and caged with strong wire-netting. We were ready and waiting for the great day. I'd never seen a pig before. And the mere thought of baby pigs was entrancing.

The day the piglets arrived in Dora Creek created a sensation. It was a quiet sleepy afternoon . . . not too long after the lunatic had escaped from Morriset. The train chuffed in, and a sack of two piglets was swung from the guard's van. The station master plopped them in the shade outside his office, and went back to his quiet siesta. It was a drowsy afternoon. No more trains were due that day.

The piglets in their sack were nervous and squirmy. They were probably the only things in Dora Creek village that were lively and alert. They wriggled and snuffled in the bag, trying to escape. The train was long gone and all was peaceful. Over the platform they went, plummetting down on to the tracks.

Have you ever heard a pig squeal? Two are even better! Blood-curdling shrieks and screams echoed across the village. Each scream was louder, more horrifying than the last. People froze. The station master was being murdered. Another lunatic was at large. The shrieks rose in pitch. It chilled the very bones. Even two young Charlie Seatons stopped their after-school fight.

Everyone galvanised into action. Fishermen grabbed oars and ran to the rescue. Mr Tafe picked up his meat cleaver in a brawny hand and headed for the station. Mr Holmes decided on a hammer from stock. The doctor grabbed his black bag and drove hell-for-leather, the horse and sulky racing and swaying stationwards.

They arrived up the ramp, breathless, in a brave and aggressive throng ready to demolish the killer. There was the poor station master, crouching on the tracks. The doctor jumped down to help him. The others didn't stop. They raced off down the platform, looking for the attacker. Shouting as they went, searching in the gloomy office and the sheds, beating the undergrowth beneath the wooden platform. Sheer bedlam. And the blood-chilling screams continued. Down in the village, frowsey mothers dragged their children indoors.

It was about then that my father arrived to pick up his piglets. He'd heard them squealing healthily as he moored the boat, and was quietly pleased that they had arrived on time, as ordered.

The pig fracas set everyone talking for miles around . . . for weeks . . . and soon pig fever was in the air. Pigs were the answer! Trees fell. Hammers banged. Pig sties sprang up everywhere. Now pigs are welcome in any hungry community, except if they are a religious no-no. And the Seventh Day Adventists lived by a few Old Testament Jewish-style rules. They were strict vegetarians. Meat was out. They could keep cows for milking. But pigs, the raw material for pork, were considered a *most* mortal sin.

One of the Church Elders decided that if he and his big family of young Fletchers were to survive financially, he would risk the wrath of the Lord and fatten six piglets for market. He did. Then he sold them to the butcher in Morisset.

It was about a month later that the good people of Avondale had their church picnic, with races and games for all. After a long and festive day in the summer sun, the menfolk had an egg-and-spoon race, and brother Fletcher won. But as he flashed through the finishing line, egg still in spoon, he dropped down dead. And everyone agreed it was the Good Lord's Judgement. He did it so all could see. Pastor Fisher underlined the point most emphatically at the Sunset Prayers over brother Fletcher's prostrate body, and at the funeral too. The widow Fletcher said 'I told him so!' . . . and married a rather handsome visiting missionary from Africa soon after.

Arnold Morgan was another of the brethren who took the risk. But the Good Lord couldn't have noticed. Arnold lived a long way from Avondale church. But he had his problems. Early one summer morn his eight pigs broke out of their sty

and went on a rampage through the orchard. They trampled down a crop of beans, forraged in the earth and gobbled up his young carrots. All through the hot morning, Arne and 'Love' chased those blessed pigs. Up and down the orchard, with sticks, yelling. It went on for hours and hours. There was no way they could catch those eight pigs. Finally the pigs got annoyed and the big boar chased 'Love'. She escaped by climbing up a peach tree. The boar had her cornered, and Arne was left to try the job single-handed. It was well past midday. He was bushed. He needed help. So, leaving 'Love' up the tree, he came and asked my father for assistance.

The two men walked back. My father looked at the pig pen, and moved a couple of stumps over the hole.

'That should hold 'em', he said. 'Now, what do you mix their mash in, Arne?'

Arne pointed to an old kerosene-can bucket. My father picked it up and started rattling it. He got the wooden mixer-stick and stirred it in the empty can. Arne looked puzzled. He needed help to *catch* 'em, not to feed 'em. 'Better open the sty gate, Arne. They'll be coming soon.'

There was a deal of snorting and snuffling, and suddenly the sound of thundering trotters. The pigs broke from the trees, en masse, carrot tops dangling from their mouths. Under the orchard fence they came, like an express train, driving straight for the pig pen. They bolted through the gate and came to an abrupt halt in front of their empty trough. 'That's how you catch pigs, Arne. It's no good chasing 'em. You gotta remember what makes 'em tick! They're funny things, pigs.'

If the arrival of our first two piglets was exciting . . . the departure of our next six porkers was sheer slapstick. It had been raining for a few days before the cattle truck arrived. So the pig sty was good and muddy, and pretty smelly.

Arnold Morgan's cow was loaded first and stood udder-end outwards, quietly munching the pile of hay that had been tossed at the cabin-end of the truck. It was there as a lure for the pigs. Now cows are sort of knock-kneed and easily put off balance, if a pig, seeing food, takes the direct route. Six times it happened! Up the ramp, straight through her knees, under the udder, between her front legs, under her chin. Bang! And she never quite knew what had happened. Nor why. Soon there were more pigs than hay. So with soulful dewy eyes, she

took to thoughtfully chewing her cud and gave an occasional petulant bellow.

Meanwhile the action in the sty was wild and noisy. Six pigs, four men and a couple of tons of slippery mud and manure. Arnold made first try with a flying tackle. He grabbed the nearest pig round the middle. It didn't even stop, but slipped through his arms and left him bang flat in the mud. First score to the pig.

The disaster called for a committee meeting. The men adjourned to the rails and discussed tactics. The man from the cattle truck said: 'You'll never hold a pig, unless you've got him by the tail and the ears simultaneously.'

This proved, technically, to be almost impossible . . . and highly unlikely nine times out of ten. It was a skill that needed two men, working as a team, with split second co-ordination . . . and a lot of hope. The speed of the pigs and the skiddy slush of the mud added to the comedy. The growing tempers of the men added spice. It was a thoroughly marvellous spectacle from my vantage point, on a corner post of the pen. The air was thick with 'Ruddy blighters!' 'Stupid galoots!' 'Bleeding binders!' 'Slippery bastards!' 'Mucky devils!' I'd never heard that sort of language before, and wondered what exactly it meant. I tried to memorise the words so I could ask my father later.

Finally the first pig was attached to two muddy men by it's ears and tail. The shrieks and squeals were so appalling, they dropped it. Then swore at each other for being so stupid.

'You ruddy galoot, you dropped it!'

'No I didn't! *You* did, you stupid fool!'

'I couldn't hold its blinking tail forever!'

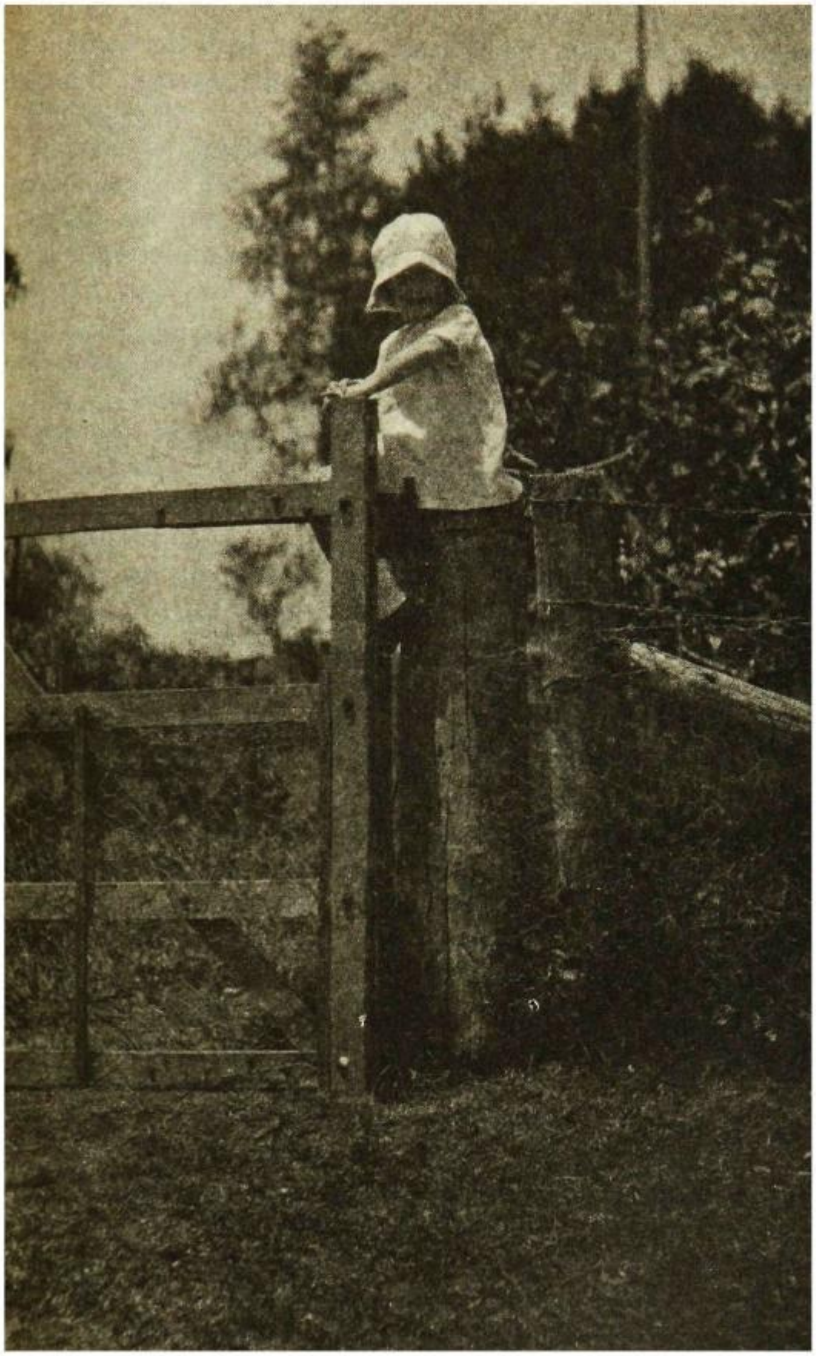
Meanwhile the pigs, figuring out their own tactics, ganged up in a corner, facing outwards. When the men approached, they all charged, knocking everyone down in the mud. The pigs joined ranks in the opposite corner. It looked like the pigs were winning!

Then my father had a bright idea.

'Let's feed the blighters! When the trough's full, they can't think of anything else.'

And that's how the game was won.

When the pigs were happily gorging with snouts in the trough, the human team made a grab for one, ears and tail.



From my vantage point on the corner post, the pig chase was a marvellous spectacle.

Screaming and squealing, it was heaved up the ramp to disorientate the cow. There'd be a pause until the remaining pigs got back to serious eating again. Then pounce! Up with another one!

The piercing yells vibrated through my blood. My ears were swamped with the shrieks. My heart raced with the excitement of it all. When the last pig was aboard and the tail-gate clanged, there was a sudden vacuum. The stimulating heights of wild excitement, made the rest of the day feel flat and unreal.

The sty was empty. The cattle truck drove away down the bush track. The men leant on the rails and talked. I didn't belong. I trudged barefoot back over the paddock, towards the house . . . kicking the occasional dry cowpat. Gradually the empty numbness went. The images started flashing through my mind. An unbidden smile twisted my closed mouth . . . a chortle bubbled through . . . the laughter sprung a leak. I hugged myself with glee, and rolled in the grass, over and over. I couldn't stop chuckling. The laughter welled up . . . again and again . . . and overflowed through my eyes in salty tears. It was like being tickled on the inside. Oh, delicious, ridiculous, mud-lorious Day of the Pigs!

Brindle

Cows are funny things. If they are milkers, they look so dewy-eyed and dreamy. Long lashed. Romantic. Sweetly placid, like their milk. We had a Jersey called Strawberry and she edged in first for milking, udder bulging. I'm sure she loved my father and loved the sensuous joy of being milked. She gave with love . . . the very first squirt full and rich . . . she never held back. 'A good wench', my father called her.

Herefords, on the other hand, have a dumb, bestial, witless look in their white-lashed eyes. Bovine. Distrustful. Almost as if they knew they are destined to become a good roast or an Irish stew. Somewhere in between, was a cow we got from somewhere, called Brindle. Not a bad milker. But distrustful and neurotic, like a thin wife, just pre-divorce.

Brindle was a problem. She hated the calves. Even her own. She hated Strawberry. She attacked Old Dick. So she had to be kept in a separate paddock. The only spare paddock was the one where my father was putting in a crop of potatoes.

Now to plant potatoes is rather tedious. You buy a big sack of potatoes and spend hours on the veranda, carefully cutting them into segments, an Eye in each. Then when the paddock is well ploughed, its a rear-up, head-down job to bury each little potato-eye into the rich brown earth.

For a cow like Brindle, the sight of her master in this vulnerable position was more than she could resist. My mother and I used to watch the never ending drama, nervously from the kitchen veranda. My father, with the sack of potatoes, moved slowly down the ploughed row. Sack on one side, his hefty 'snake stick' on the other. Just near his right hand.

Brindle would watch from the far end of the paddock. She'd browse along the fence line where the grass was lush. Then she'd catch sight of my father's upturned rump. She'd pause and watch. Her resentment would well up. You could see it

happen. She'd trample the ground. Suddenly she'd paw the earth. Down would go her head, sharp horns in position. The angry pawing speeded up. The dust rose. Then she'd charge! Down the potato row she'd go, gathering speed as she went.

We watched spell-bound.

'My God, he'll be killed this time!' yelled my mother. There was nothing we could do.

At full gallop Brindle put her head down for the final blood-thirsty impact. She demanded satisfaction! My father, head-down, watched her closely through his legs. At the final moment, he'd pick up the 'snake stick' and, with a mighty back-hander, he'd wallop her across the forehead. Brindle would stop dead in her tracks, with a look of unbelievable surprise.

She'd give her head a cautious shake to check if it was still there . . . stand stock still and eye the placid upturned rump of my father. Then she'd give a mighty shudder from head to tail. Something had happened, but she couldn't figure what. With tottery legs, she'd wander drunkenly back to the fence pasture.

It took Brindle about an hour and a half to recover her poise. And with her bovine poise, came her resentment. A few angry bellows. The head would go down again. The dust would rise as she pawed the earth, and the duel would be repeated. Fortunately Brindle was a born loser. Her headache at the end of the day must have been mammoth. My mother was a nervous wreck, but my father always said:

'There's absolutely *nothing* to worry about, May. I can feel the earth shake when she *starts*. I can *watch* her through my legs . . . and cows *always* shut their eyes at the last charge . . . *before* they butt. So *all* I do is step to one side when she's six feet away. and WHAM! There's *nothing* to it! You should feel worried about the *cow* . . . not *me*.'

Who knows if it was quite true? My father never told a lie, a downright lie. But he did trick my mother into walking through a paddock where there was a bull. 'Isn't that a *bull*, Malcolm? You'll never get me in the same paddock as a bull!'

'My dear, have you *ever* seen a bull chew its cud?' he asked reassuringly.

'No, I can't say I have', said my mother.

'Well come along my dear, and don't give it another thought.' He looked down and gave me a quiet wink.

She discovered the trick that night. She overhead me saying my prayers: '. . . and thank you, God, for not letting that bull charge my muvver.'

Brindle's personality problems seemed to start when a lamb for the slaughter escaped from Tafe's killing yards. Somehow it followed the creek bank and ended up in our paddock one morning. The pleasant pastoral sight of familiar cows, calves and a Clydesdale quietly grazing must have been very reassuring to the poor lost sheep. It gave a happy leap and raced towards the group of animals. They, on the other hand, had never seen a sheep. So they galloped off in different directions, and nervously watched its movements. Old Dick was closest. So the sheep gave another little friendly bounce and trotted towards him. He stood stock still and waited till it got within sniffing distance. The cows watched their giant. He was their leader. Dick's big head came down. His nostrils flared to take the sheep's aroma. Unknown! Probably dangerous! went the messages to his brain. Up went his head with a loud snort. He gave a high-pitched whinny, shook his head, backed off and did a ponderous right-turn . . . showing his massive rump to the crestfallen sheep.

It looked around hopefully and spied Brindle through Dick's retreating legs. Another little leap and off it went in hot pursuit. Brindle spun off at a medium trot, udder swinging, hind legs mincing like a matron running in high-heels. The sheep sped up. Brindle gave a panic-stricken bellow and raced towards the other cows. Round the paddock they went. Strawberry leading, the calves beside her and Brindle well behind. Wherever Brindle went, the sheep followed doggedly. Along the fence line, into corners, down the straight diagonal. Brindle galloped, her cud in a green foamy slobber as she let out frantic bellows.

It went on for about half an hour, till the sheep tired and stopped to graze on a particularly lush clover patch. My father hopped over the orchard fence, called to the sheep and made friends. He led it docilely into the cow bales and gave it a drink. The sheep had at last found a friend, but Brindle was never the same afterwards. She mistrusted everyone and everything. Her rage seething shallowly below the surface. One never knew when she'd be likely to attack.

She chased me once from the dairy, right across the

paddock. I scrambled over the fence into the orchard, tearing myself and my smock on the barbed wire. She bellowed to me angrily. There were little green apples . . . windfalls . . . like stones on the ground. So I pelted her with them. They made a satisfying plop as they hit and bounced off her heaving belly. So I threw more. Finally she noticed one and ate it. The bellowing stopped while she nosed around and gobbled the lot.

The next day Brindle had a noticeable bulge.

'Reckon Brindle's going to have a calf', said my father. 'She must have got onto Morgan's bull.'

I hadn't mentioned the apple episode. Only the chase.

Of course it wasn't a calf. It was the dreaded bloat! So, in fact, I unwittingly murdered Brindle. My father could have saved her, had he only known. Like he saved the Morgans' cows once. A quick, precise stab in the side and the air whooshed out of the belly with a mighty gush.

Now waking up to a dead cow disturbs the whole day's routine. You can't leave her lying in the paddock with the flies. So my father put off the ploughing and hitched Old Dick to the sledge. He heaved and pulled her heavy carcase on to the narrow platform. Her legs were a problem. They stuck over the side, dragging forlornly, floppily in the grass. We proceeded at a funereal pace to a suitable burying place in the orchard. Brindle would make rich fertiliser.

When Old Dick was unhitched, my father paced the length of the cow . . . about eight feet. He started by digging a long trench. The black earth piled up on one side, alive with worms. The trench was widened, until it was about four feet wide. It was a mighty big grave. He eyed the dead cow, eyed the hole and decided it was about big enough.

By this time it was mid-afternoon. She'd stiffened up by then. I was sent to ask Arnold Morgan if he'd come over and lend a hand. For me, the murderess, it was a rare bit of excitement. I'd never been to a cow's funeral, any funeral, before.

The two men, heaving and puffing, rolled Brindle off the sledge. They meant her to drop sideways into the grave. But something happened and she got away from them, landing feet up, on her back. No way was the hole deep enough for that position. Her feet cast four long shadows across the grass. So I was sent home to get some ropes from the shed, while Arnold and my father discussed the corpse.

'All in all, she's better gone', said my father. 'She was only trouble. The silly galoot. I wouldn't have had the heart to sell her to anyone else.'

'Well, she'll certainly make your apple trees grow a might', said Arnold. 'They'll get 'er right at the roots, where they need it.'

When I returned with the ropes, my father jumped into the grave with Brindle. He hooked the ropes round her neck and her hips. They harnessed Old Dick and hauled her out. The cloud of eager flies settled again on her various orifices.

With two more ropes, the men got her cradled horizontally. Dick took the weight on one side, they on the other. There was a great deal of heaving and ho-ing. Brindle finally thudded down. The flies rose in a noisy swarm. But the grave was too narrow. Her stiff legs stuck out, and made her lie at an angle of 45 degrees. The sun was getting lower.

'Fetch the axe. We'll break the blighter's legs!'

It seemed an extremely cruel decision to the murderess, but they wouldn't listen. So Brindle was finally laid to rest as the sun was setting.

'Ashes to ashes, dust to dust', said my father as he shovelled the mountain of earth on Brindle. 'If we don't have her, the Devil must!'

As the seasons passed, I carefully watched the apple trees that guarded Brindle's grave. Sure enough, as Arne had said, they grew quite a might. The apples tasted sweeter, too. So she wasn't such a bad cow after all.

The Floods

Dora Creek started to flood about 1927, when the entrance to Lake Macquarie silted up at Swansea, near the ocean. Because that area was in a different shire, dredging was deemed unnecessary . . . as Swansea never flooded.

The floods came year after year and finally drove my father off the land, bankrupt, to the city. That was 1933, the year after Phar Lap died, the year after the Sydney Harbour Bridge was opened.

For a child, the flood season brought great change and excitement. It built up in a marvellous sequence that I came to know, like a well-remembered opera.

First the summer thunderstorms with heavy rain drumming incessantly on the iron roof. Heavy clouds sliced jaggedly with bolts of lightning. I remember being on the veranda with my father one evening, watching the storm come in. He held me in his arms to watch the approach of a cloud. It was like a giant black hand reaching out of the north, fingers elongating till they seemed to be grabbing for our house. The dog slunk in to crouch under the old wooden settee. It was a solid cedar colonial thing from my grandmother's house.

Suddenly a great streak of lightning leapt from the black hand and demolished a sapling in the next paddock. The thunder was instantaneous. The noise so gigantic it shook the air, enveloped us with one huge tremor of sound. My father jumped back, crashed into the settee and sat down with such force he split the solid wooden seat in two. Marvellous drama!

'That one was a bit close', was all he said. 'We'll go over tomorrow and I'll show you what lightning can do!'

The leafy sapling was a charred stick. No sign of leaves. It was like a bad fairy had cursed it. The ground was split open into deep fissures that exploded like rays from the trunk.

'The electricity from the lightning ran along the roots',

explained my father. 'You can see how powerful it is . . . and why you should *never* shelter under a tree in a thunder storm! Up at Lerida Station in Queensland, we used to leave our horses and lie flat down on the ground. If a man is the tallest thing in flat country the lightning will hit him, just like it hit this tree.'

Early lessons like that leave a momentous impression. I grew to love the pagan exuberance of a storm. The dynamic reality of nature. It's rare but brilliant to meet other storm worshippers. They're a unique breed.

The summer rains started in the wallum country, then moved westwards into the Dividing Range. Four days after our rain had eased, the river began to rise. We watched the river grow and flow in great muddy swirls. Sweeping down came a parade of logs and trees . . . sad sodden bundles of black feathers washed from some chookyard . . . packing cases . . . rafts of twigs . . . and sometimes a dead horse or a bloated cow with stiff legs and a terrible smell.

Near the house was a big river oak with a horizontal branch leaning over the bank. It became our flood indicator. If the water reached the branch, we knew the river would keep rising and break the banks. My mother and father would watch from the kitchen window, making their plans in hushed voices. The minute the river swallowed the branch, my mother would rush into a flurry of packing.

Two sets of dry clothes for everyone were folded neatly and stacked in the tin trunk. Night-clothes, towels, tooth-brushes. I was allowed to take two dolls and two books. Then the trunk was clicked shut and lifted on to the kitchen table. My father would bring in bricks and raise the piano about twelve inches. It was a hopeful gesture to pacify my mother.

Then the bedclothes would be stacked in the high ceiling cupboards. The books above the window seat would be moved to the topmost shelves or stacked through the man-hole along with my mother's music sheets. Next the food was moved to higher shelves. By this time the river would have swept across the house paddock and my father would moor the boat to the veranda steps.

Barefooted, my father rolled his trousers up to the knee, donned oilskins and a sack, like a hood, over his head and shoulders. It was time to round up the animals. They were

always safe on the ridge where the cow bales were situated. The floods turned it into an island, but there was fodder enough over there for six or seven days. The chooks were sheltered in the barn where it was warm and dry and there was food aplenty. Always at flood-time there seemed to be two batches of new chicks. They brought my mother's maternal instinct into full flush. She'd send my father off with a box padded with newspaper and towels and a bowl of mashed boiled eggs for the poor babies.

So the Overture and the First Act, Scene One, was complete! Next came the waiting.

When the water rose to the top of the veranda step, I was lifted on to the kitchen table alongside the tin trunk, with hurricane lamps and the Tilly lamp behind me. Jack the dog would be put in the iron baby-bath on the floor because, above all, he *hated* water. It represented those infernal weekly baths.

With typical English *savoir-faire*, my mother would then make a cup of tea with toasted cheese. 'No matter *what*, we have to keep our strength up!' She would then proceed to entertain me (and my father when he came in). The songs were from music hall acts she'd seen in London twenty years before. She danced the cakewalk and the black-bottom. She sang 'Two Little Girls in Blue', 'Little Dolly Daydream—Pride of Idaho', 'Two Lovely Black Eyes' and one about a little tin soldier on the sixpenny shelf who fell in love with the doll on the one-and-ninepenny shelf. It was very sad. But the whole gay performance was pure enchantment from my front row stall on the table.

We forgot the flood, until finally it seeped across the kitchen lino. Slowly, a trickle at first. Then an inch . . . two inches deep.

The dog, like a puzzled captain in my bath, floated out of the kitchen down the hall into the sitting room, where he rocked gently and bumped against the French doors. My mother dragged it back and moored it safely to the kitchen table leg.

Often a snake, looking lost and confused and totally out of control, would float through the house, making its entrance and exit on the flood tide. Soon we would have to leave.

Arnold Morgan rowed through the orchard and tied his boat to the veranda steps. It must have been pre-arranged, because

it always happened. Arnold wore the oilskins and sack outfit, too. I was always intrigued at how white and naked their legs looked. Usually feet were brown and dusty. Now they were deathly white and wrinkled like raisins. There was a high-tide mark of grass seeds in the hairs above their knees.

First the tin trunk would be loaded into the bow of our boat, along with the dog who was shivering and totally subdued. Then my father would signal to Mr Russell by firing the gun three times. The Russells lived on the hill on the opposite side of the creek. That's where we always lived out the flood, in a sort of holiday atmosphere.

Next came Act Two. The wildly exciting part. My father had to row my mother and me, the dog and the tin trunk to safety across the flooded river.

Arnold would row his boat downstream, in the safety of the orchards. He was our guardian, in case something dreadful happened. He could row to the rescue if needed. Keeping pace with our progress, Mr Russell would run along the river bank to catch our boat when we finally landed.

How I remember the leaving of our home. To step from the veranda into the surging boat ... to feel the tight way my mother held me to her was strange and gave new dimension to my excitement. My father gave me a smile of encouragement. He had thrown back the hood and taken off his oilskins, so he was free to row better. Strength and endurance would be needed. Clear vision too, if he was to miss the trees and logs that swept down the centre of the river. There was less flow near the bank, but the middle was a raging torrent of debris and water.

One crossing I remember most vividly. The rain came stinging down just as we left the shelter of the house. The water there flowed in gentle, erratic eddies, making it hard for my father to hold direction. As we got clear of the house, the first force of the flood hit us. My father glided with it, steering with one oar so we escaped the danger of the clutching river oaks. Instantly we were swept into the mainstream.

Then it was as if a giant took over his body. He rowed like a demon, swerving to miss huge logs. Rowing diagonally across the force of the current. Once he let the boat be swept in a circle to miss a big tree. Then he pulled on the oars till the powerful muscles stood out on his arms. The rain was stinging

down, so we could hardly keep our eyes open. I buried my face in my lap to stop the hurt.

It was then my mother called: 'Watch out! Log behind . . . my God!' The boat swung head into the torrent, to let it glide safely past. And my father took breath to start the battle again. Soon we could hear Mr Russell's encouraging shouts: 'Come on Malcolm! Only another twenty feet! Come on!'

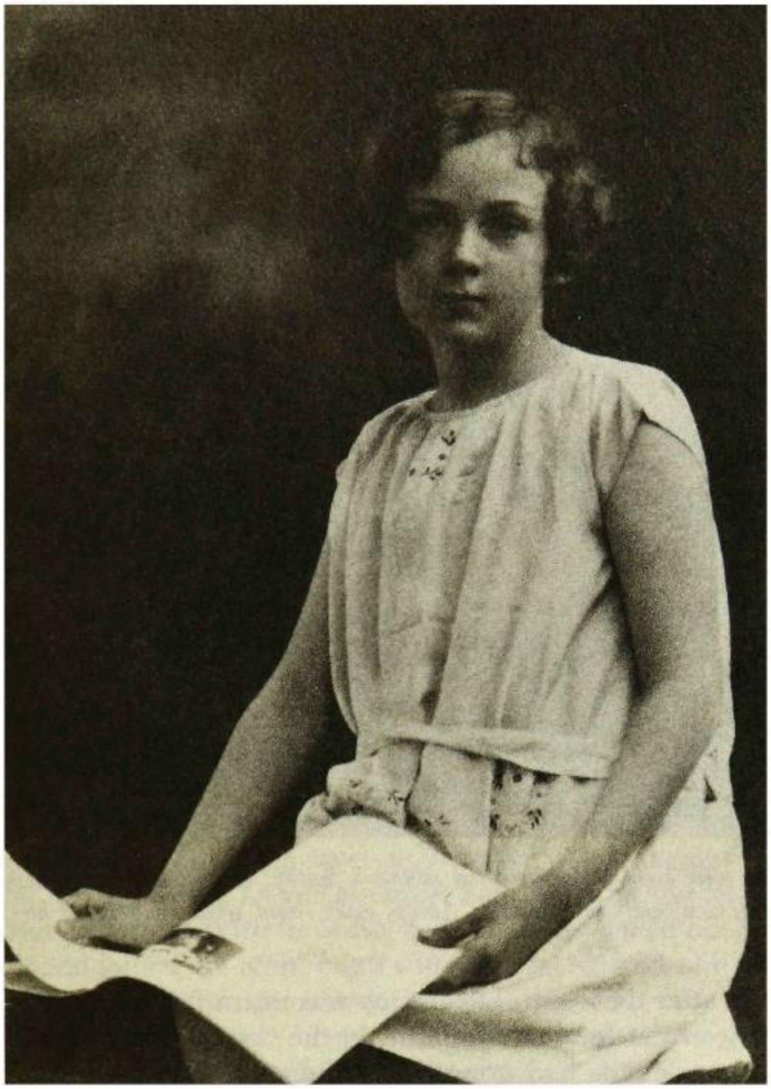
The speed of the water diminished into sweeps and swirls as my father nosed into the bank. Mr Russell, knee deep in water, grabbed the rope and quickly threw it round a tree trunk. The dog jumped out. I was picked up and passed to waiting arms. Then my mother scrambled out. She was wearing my father's trousers, hitched up to her armpits with rope. She steadied herself on the tin trunk as she clambered over the bow. Let's face it now: she couldn't swim and had a bad heart. Not bad for 4 feet 10 inches of forty-seven-year-old English stock! She was known as 'a plucky little woman'.

My father lifted out the precious tin trunk and set it on the bank. They sat me on the top, and lifting it by the handles, the two men carried it up the hill. I remember crying because the rain stung my face. They hooded me with the sack. It was wet and heavy and I remember the dank hessian smell.

So commenced six glorious days' holiday in the Russell household. We had a spectacular view of the flooded orchards. From the veranda the men checked the cows, pigs and horse with binoculars every morning. Molly and I played wild wet-weather games up and down the long hall, while the grown-ups chatted over interminable tea-and-scones. In the kitchen, a massive Aga cooker kept the room warm and cosy. A huge black iron kettle with a brass tap at the bottom steamed merrily. In front of the stove, two clothes-horses were laden with wet clothes and towels. There was a line-up of muddy wellington gubbers outside the kitchen door.

Molly and I were allowed to go out and play in the rain for half an hour before our five o'clock bath. It was a splashy laughing affair and when we got into our nighties we were allowed to join the grown-ups.

My mother and Mrs Russell regaled us with marvellous stories of their childhood . . . a golden age the like of which we would never see. They both came from families with eight children. Mrs Russell had raced a four-in-hand through the



Molly Russell, aged eight, had her mother's Irish beauty. She devoted her life to nursing the sick.

streets of Taree at the age of fifteen, and been sent to bed without any supper, for 'showing off'. One would have thought the crime should have been 'danger to the community'!

At seventeen, my mother had danced in the streets of London, when they heard Mafeking was relieved. (It was six



There were eight children in my mother's family. (Emily May, my mother, back row, extreme left with 'Aunty' Amy, aged seven, in front of her.)

weeks after the event, but the joy was unconfined.) My mother had seen the famous Houdini do the floating lady trick—she and her friends had gone three nights in succession to see if they could see how she was suspended in the air.

Mrs Russell's cousin had been nursed by Ned Kelly! He was on the run and stopped at their house for food and rest: 'And a fine Irish gentleman he was, too, they say. Knew how to wind a baby! For he had to, while my aunt was cooking.'

Later the menfolk would add their stories. Mr Russell's family were pioneers from Wyong-Wyee way.

'My father, God rest his soul, had trouble in the early days with people thieving timber off his land. He'd fell the mahogany and cedar trees and they'd come at night and drag

the logs away. Now in those days there weren't many people who could read, but they recognised the £ sign and the word REWARD! So the cunning old devil asked his wife for all the old Sunlight Soap wrappers. You know, the ones with "£1000 REWARD if this soap isn't pure"? Well he nailed these all over his property. They were printed in Red and Yellow and Blue and looked very legal and officious. Never had any more trouble!'

The kangaroo hunt was another favourite. I loved it especially because I was well into *Dot and the Kangaroo*, one of my favourite books.

'The buggers were everywhere knocking down me father's crops, God rest his soul...'

'Shh! Joe watch your language. The children!' hissed Mrs Russell.

'Well, this night we decided to drive them off the property. We mounted up at one boundary, a horse every twelve feet. I was only a little runt, so I clung on behind my brother. Well, they fired the guns and we started at a trot. The river was on one side. We flushed 'em out. There were kangaroos everywhere. They went faster, and we went faster. Finally we were going through the scrub at full gallop. I remember the moon was just rising. Big and yeller, right on the tree tops ... when whoosh! I nearly got knocked off the horse. We saw this great big-man-kangaroo flying over our heads. Clear against the moon and big as the Devil! He must have been caught behind us. But picture it! With us at full gallop, he just sailed over our heads and joined the mob! I can still hear the whoosh of his tail as he went hurtling over. God, he was a big one. Not many around now. But never in my life have I seen such a giant. Why he must have bounded more than twenty-five feet in one leap!'

The pictures were clear and vivid in our mind's eye when he told that story, although I found it hard to reduce Mr Russell to a child. He always looked a wizened, bald little runt behind his brother, wearing jodhpurs and leather leggings, as he did in ripe middle-age.

My father had stories of Lerida Station in Queensland. Tales of boundary riding, where the fence on one side of a paddock was twenty miles long. It took a week or more to check one paddock. He and his brother slept under the stars. That

was before the Great War. The station owners had a Model-T Ford, but that was only used for picnics. I loved the rather risqué story of the Pommie bloke who came out to be a jackaroo. No one could meet him at Winton station about sixty miles away, so they left a horse with the station master the week before he was due. About twenty miles out from Winton, he got the call of nature. (Here my father would wink.) 'Well he didn't have any paper, did he? So he looked around for a big soft leaf. And sure enough there was this soft furry looking one. Only it was a stinging nettle. Well I tell you I don't know how that Pommie bloke rode the forty miles. But he didn't sit down for a week. Poor galoot!'

Then there were stories of mirages that bent the light, so they could see the homestead twenty miles away when they were out boundary riding. Once they saw smoke and flames in the mirage and rode back to save the homestead.

'Had a Chinese cook out there and the shearers used to give him hell. He was a good cook too . . . by shearers' standards . . . but they just liked to rile the old Chink. By jove, he was a *real* Chinaman. Had a long black pigtail and wore a little flat cap, like a skull cap. And he wore baggy pants and a tunic. Looked real funny, but he could cook! Yes, he could cook, but they pulled his pigtail and teased him no end. And he'd just smile and nod.

'Well, anyway, he got his own back. Made a strong curry this night, and laced it with castor oil and epsom salts! If they'd had the strength, I reckon they'd have lynched him. Then they kinda saw the funny side, and figured he was probably the best cook they'd ever find out west.

'So after the first skirmish, he stayed at Lerida for years. Finally died there I believe. That's pretty much a record for a shearer's cook, I reckon!'

These story-times always happened in the Russells' sitting room. Mr Russell deep in his old leather wing-chair, while my father lounged in a high-backed wicker arm chair that bulged with fat feather-stuffed chintz cushions. The chair gave small mouse-like squeaks when he shifted his weight. Molly and I curled up in our cubby-house under the long cedar dining table. We peeped out from under the knobby fringe of the dark red velvet table-cloth.

My mother and Mrs Russell sat facing each other, on the

wicker lounge, dispensing tea and scones from the traymobile. My mother looked even smaller and more doll-like when she sat next to Mrs Russell, who was a magnificent Wagnerian matron, with giant well-corseted curves. It always intrigued me that such a big lady could have such small dainty feet. They were always encased in high-heeled black pumps, even at breakfast-time. Mrs Russell's plump face was always wreathed in smiles, or pouting in sympathy over someone's problem. 'A little jam tart' or 'a wee hot scone and cream' was her cure-all for our childish problems. She believed 'just a wee sip of sherry' would help, definitely help, most grown-ups.

It was an old colonial house with timber walls and high ceilings. There was a punkah that could be pulled by the children, or Mr Russell's foot, on hot days. On the wall above our mothers was a huge oil painting, six feet square and framed in a massive rococo gilt frame. It was a vast picnic scene with Persian perspectives and Pieter Bruegel characters dressed in Edwardian clothes. This masterpiece had been painted by Mrs Russell and her sister Mrs Mealey, long ago when they were teenagers. Or as the term was then: 'when we'd passed the difficult age and before we were married'.

It was always fascinating to me, because all the characters at the picnic were Mrs Russell's brothers and sisters and relatives. Each had a name and some were now dead.

'Poor Uncle Toby, he fell off a horse on his way home one night... That's little Kitty, she got diphtheria and died... Aunt Mildred, such a pretty woman, died in childbirth. And that one's Jeanie. She died of a broken heart when her fiancé was killed in the Boer War. That's him sitting next to her in the boat.'

Tears would well up in Mrs Russell's brown eyes and she would sigh:

'They were *so* much in love, those two. I remember when she got the letter. It was edged in black, you know, and she fainted. We were all living at Taree then. My but they were happy times. We had such a *big* family. At least fifteen round the table for every meal. It's that very table there. Fifteen of us, with *mountains* of bread and butter at each end! And the stews my mother used to make! They were fit for the angels in paradise! And my father used to serve, you know. Sitting there at the head of the table. He was a marvellous carver! Men these

days just *don't* seem to have the knack.' She would look pointedly at Mr Russell.

And so the quiet lazy days of our marooning went by, until Act Three.

My father and Mr Russell would sit in the big squatter's chairs on the veranda, and watch the flood waters slowly recede. When the verandas of our house rose above the muddy water, my mother would heave a great sigh, and say: 'Well Malcolm, I suppose it's time to start clearing up'. She'd put on a pair of my father's trousers, tuck the legs into her Wellington boots, tie a scarf round her hair and they would trudge down the hill to the boat.

They'd be gone all day and return tired and weary at sunset. We would all we waiting on the veranda to hear the news.

'Well I think the piano will be all right. The water only got over the pedals, but it lifted the veneer. There's over an inch of mud on the floors! You can *shovel* it out. But another day's work and we'll get rid of that.'

My father would take up the story: 'You know we forgot to move the breadcrock, and there was a dead snake in the bottom with a soggy loaf of bread. Both drowned! The wooden lid must have been askew, then floated back into place. It swelled and jammed with the wet. Thank heavens all the books are safe. Not a water mark on any of them!'

My mother continued the story, while my father sat on the top step and heaved at his wellingtons.

'The blankets and sewing things and patterns are all right. We moved them from the ottoman to a top cupboard. Of course the treadle of the sewing machine is rusty and will need oiling. But, oh! You should see the ottoman! All the padding round the side has slumped. It will have to be re-upholstered. Horrible job! All new kapok . . . but the chintz will scrub up.'

'It's a heavy job. Poor thing! Maybe I can come down and help . . . although I'm no earthly good with a needle . . .' clucked Mrs Russell with a sympathetic pout.

I butted in, forgiven for once . . . 'What about my Dolls' House, muvver?'

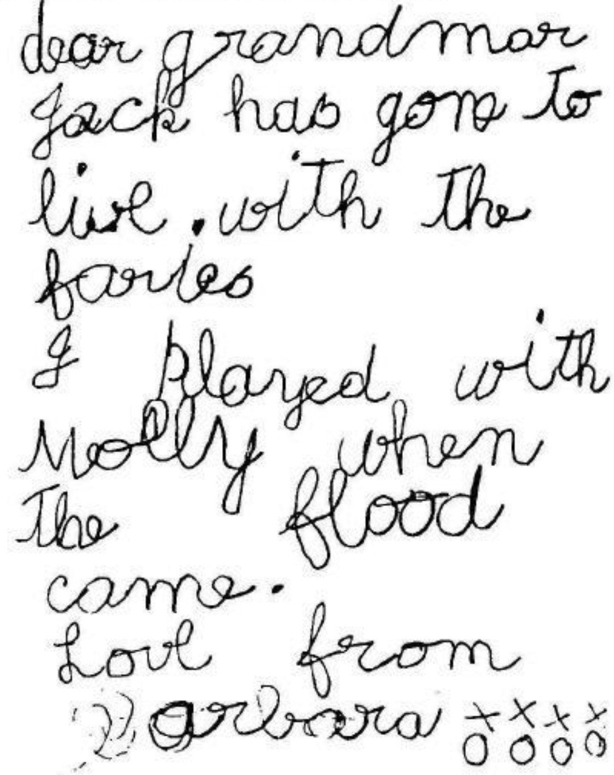
'Well you'll have to give it a scrub out. And the curtains have a high-tide mark of mud. You'll be a busy girl, like the rest of us!'

'Heffelump's pretty soggy', said my father, 'but you're just

lucky those dolls can swim. They look a bit bedraggled . . . but a week or so in the sun, and I reckon they'll dry out.'

I never saw the house in its total after-flood shambles, but about the third day I was allowed to go back with my parents to 'help clean-up'. It felt like 'play' to me. Feet wet, as final buckets of water sluiced through every room in the house. While the floors were drying, I'd wander off to wade and slither . . . and finally slip and swim in the shallow murky lakes that still moated the house.

After the fourth flood we noticed a smell under the house. It was poor old Jack, the dog. My friend since I was a day-old baby. My protector. He'd apparently gone to his safe-place-on-bath-days and when the water rose so quickly he'd been trapped and drowned. It was all very sad and sobering, and it was hard to accept my mother's explanation: 'He's gone to live with the fairies, my darling. Don't cry!'


dear grandmar
Jack has gone to
live. with The
faries
I played with
Molly when
The flood
came.
Love from
Barbara xxxx oooo

Slow dawnings about the harsh realities of life unfolded in my mind as I carefully wrote this letter: 'Dear Grandmar, Jack has gone to live with the fairies . . .'.

My eyes and nose pushed grave doubts around in my mind. It was the beginning . . . the first glimmerings of awareness and questioning, that finally demolished the Santa Claus myth and the Tooth Fairy, too.

That flood, in 1933, had been exceptionally high. After walking through the orchards with my father, it was obvious there'd be no fruit on the bottom half of the trees. He went quiet and his shoulders took on an unfamiliar slump. We trudged home through the water-logged soil. 'It doesn't look good, May', was all he said.

A few weeks later we watched ominous black clouds roll in from the north. There was a steady roaring sound far away. A coldness in the air.

'That sounds like hail. Come inside', said my father.

There was one mighty crash on the roof, and a block of ice the size of a football bounced onto the grass. Within minutes, the white pelting sheet moved up the orchard towards us, obliterating every tree. We could see the nearest trees shivering under impact. Shredded leaves and half-inch hail-stones danced in a flurry on the whitening ground.

The noise on the tin roof was deafening. It filled the whole house with quivering shock-waves of sound. Windows pinged as hail-stones hit. The kitchen window shattered. We all moved to the safety of the inside hall where we could watch the havoc happening through the windows of the four adjoining rooms. The half-mile wall of storm passed over in less than ten minutes . . . wavering off towards Graveley's old farm . . . leaving the house deathly quiet. We could hear ourselves breathe again.

From the veranda, we surveyed the damage. All the big peach, pear and apple trees had their tops stripped to the wood. The citrus trees, with their thick green foliage, survived better. Above the flood-damage, they each had about an eighth of their greenery left. On the storm-side they were stripped bare.

'Well, that's about it, May', said my father.

Within weeks, Old Dick had to be shot. His teeth had worn down. He couldn't eat properly. There was no way to put in small crops. The plough lay idle.

My mother developed breast-cancer and was rushed to Sydney for treatment. There was no health care service then, and no money in our bank. The American doctor at the Seventh Day Adventist Wahroonga Sanatorium cared for her.

. . . and never sent a bill. Then my father got very sick. He was being slowly poisoned from the teeth-fillings he'd had twelve years before. My puppy Don took a fox-bait and died. My kitten was taken by a fox. I read sad books like *The Little Match Girl*, *The Mermaid and the Prince* and *Two Years before the Mast* . . . just so I could sit crying, and blame the book.

Meanwhile, all over the country, the banks were in a fore-closing mood. Like so many other families, we moved to the city. That strange bustling maze of suburban streets, and armies of regimented children in brick blockhouse schools. Frustrated teachers screamed the lessons at us, and slashed their desks with the cane.

All in all, 1933 was not what you'd call a very good year.

But looking back, it's reassuring to know that when things reach their lowest ebb . . . when they can't get any worse . . . they can only get better. Very often different! But better!

NO ORDINARY CHILDHOOD

On the shady banks of Dora Creek, in the foothills behind Lake Macquarie, Barbara Corbett spent an enchanted childhood. Even in the 1920s, this isolated community was tangled with cultures of distant pasts, distant places.

Her world, like that of many children, was peopled with imaginary animals and secret places. But it was also inhabited by real characters just as unusual: the Livingstone sisters still dressed in Victorian splendour, Irish and German vagabonds, Mr James who made a canoe for the young Barbara just as he had for the Hapsburg princes in Austria.

The joys of country living — milking time, eggs hatching, harvests in the orchard — contrast sharply with the bushfires, floods and then the Great Depression which finally bankrupted her father.

"Barbara Corbett writes with her nose as well as her typewriter and one can almost smell the fresh grass, the roses, the thick clotted cream, the peaches, the biscuits hot and spicy from the oven, the wonderful perfume of apple jelly boiling on the fuel stove ..."

Patricia Thompson, *Weekend Australian*



"Many a city slicker will envy Barbara Corbett the wonders of her rural childhood."

Newcastle Herald

"Members of the Alcorn and McDonald clans will find historical references of immense interest."

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